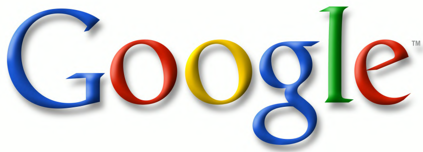

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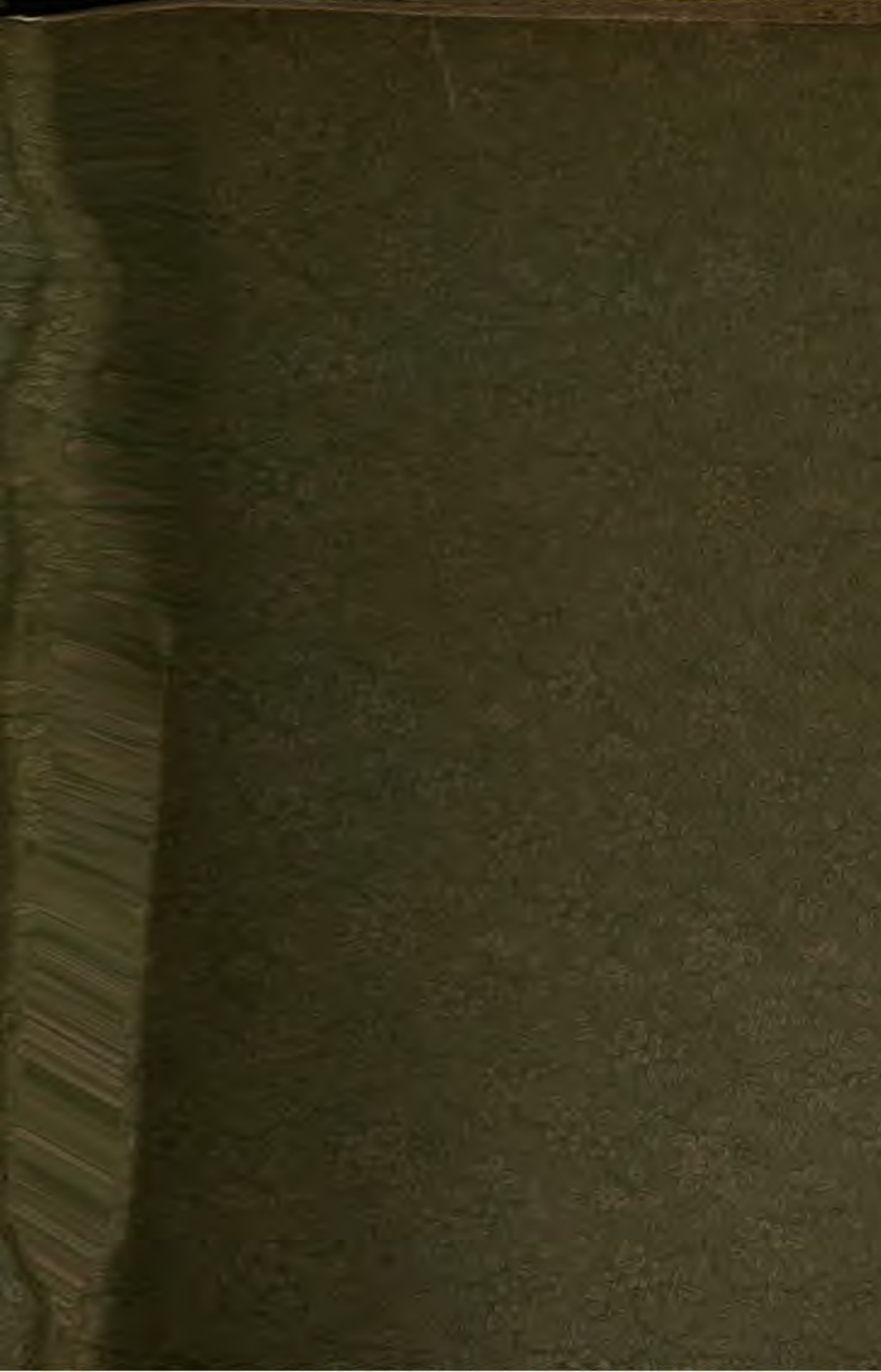
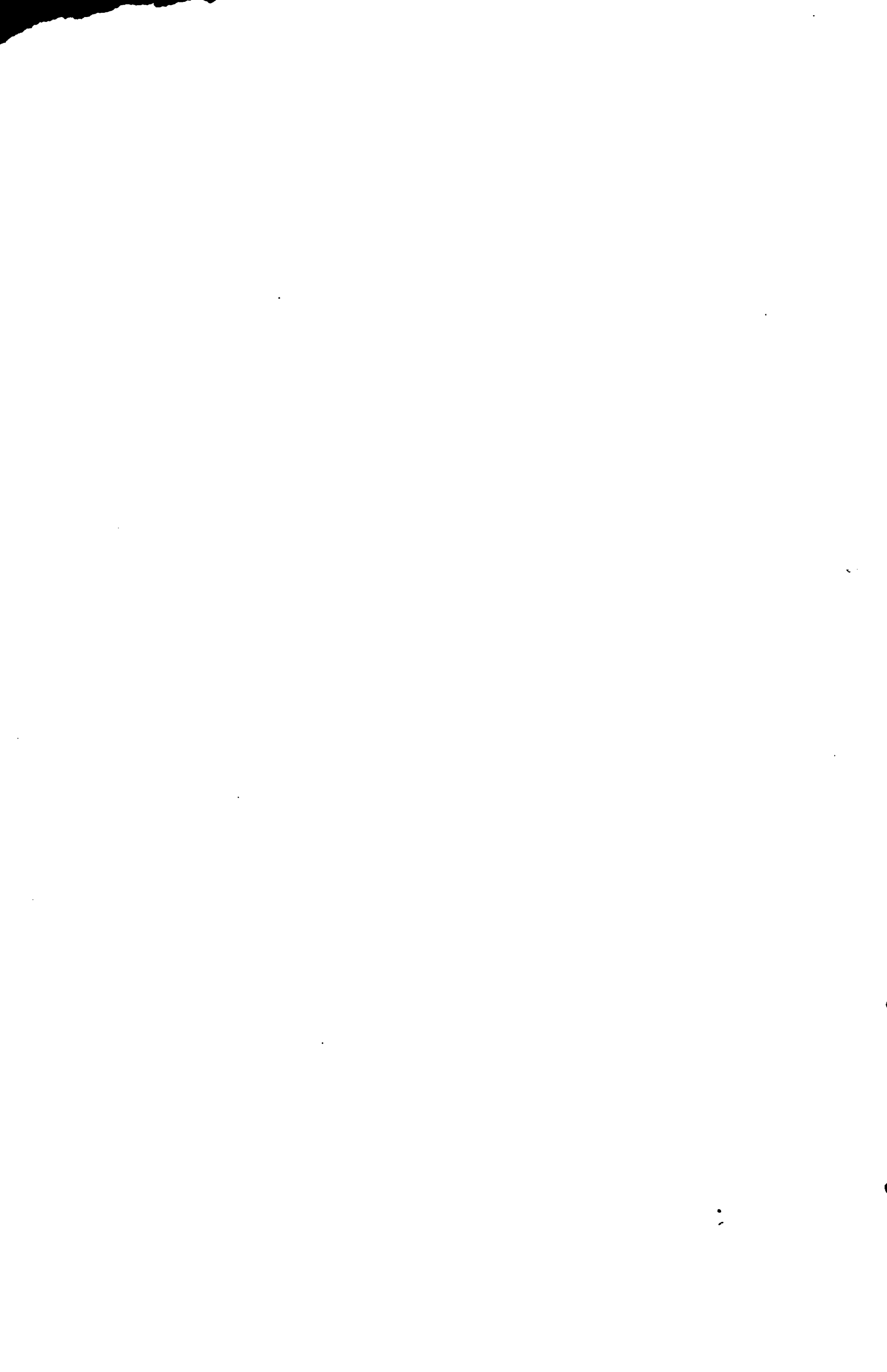
The Luck of the Darrells

By

James Payn





THE

LUCK OF THE DARRELLS

VOL. II.

PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
LONDON

THE

LUCK OF THE DARRELLS

A NOVEL

BY

JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF

'BY PROXY' 'THE CANON'S WARD' 'THICKER THAN WATER' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON
LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
1885

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THE

LUCK OF THE DARRELLS.

CHAPTER XVI.

A GREENWICH DINNER.

THE summer was getting far advanced, and London was 'thinning'—a common expression, though about as applicable a one as it would be if applied to some scene of tropical vegetation where a few gay flowers have been transplanted elsewhere. In the absence or cessation of the more brilliant entertainments, modest little amusements found their place, and Hester became a frequent visitor at the Wests, where, in the garden attached to their house in Bayswater, lawn-tennis was played. It was a game

that was new to Hester, who pursued it with the usual enthusiasm (unintelligible to outsiders as the passion for bezique), and as, thanks to the exercise it afforded, the roses on her cheeks, which late hours had paled a little, soon began to deepen, she was encouraged to cultivate it.

Mrs. West even proposed that Hester should come and stay a few days with them, where the air, she protested, was purer than it was in Welham Street, as the look-out, for the house faced the garden, was certainly more countrified. At first Hester positively declined to leave her father, whose health and spirits had of late been manifestly declining, and only consented upon his pointing out that her so doing would enable him to run down for a day or two to the seaside, which he always found to be beneficial.

To the Colonel the seaside, and indeed the country generally, had long meant Brighton; he rarely left London for any other place, and if he did, regretted it; but on this occasion he

had been recommended by some medical authority to Bognor. If he found the place pleasant, it was possible, he said, that he would take a house for Hester and himself there for the autumn—a preposterous notion, at which even nurse Arkell smiled. The Luck of the Darrells might do many marvellous things for them in connection with the sea, but could hardly bring her master to such a pass as that. In the meantime, and while he preened his wings—it must be confessed with as little pride as pleasure—for this brief flight, he sent Hester to Mrs. West, where he also paid a daily visit himself and generally dined. She was a hospitable woman, and exercised hospitality in the best manner; her dinners were good, without the least pretentiousness; and (what is very rare at houses where there is no male head) her wines were honest—not, as the wit said, 'poor but honest.'

Her income was modest, but sufficient for the wants of herself and girls, and since it would suffer no decrease at her death, she saw

no reason for a strict economy. On the other hand, she never indulged in extravagances; even dinner-parties were rare with her; but (what is much less common than the giving of dinner-parties) her friends were always welcome to drop into dinner, and sure of finding one. Her brother had been a brother-officer of the Colonel's, and hence his friendship with the widow, to whom he was attached by all that was best in his character. He had even sometimes said to himself respecting her, 'Now if I were a marrying man there is the mother for my Hester;' but then he was not a marrying man.

Still less was Mrs. West a marrying woman. She lived for her daughters—a circumstance, however, which in no way made life less pleasant to her, or prevented her from sympathising with and doing good to others. A man whom we hear spoken of as 'a good father,' or a woman as 'a good mother,' are too often little else that is good as regards

their relations with the world at large. Their affection for their family seems to absorb all their capabilities of tenderness; with others kindness grows with its growth at home, and throws out its tendrils in all directions; and I verily believe that the contemplation of her own daughters, and the reflection of how things would be with them should they become motherless, begat in Mrs. West an affection for Hester Darrell over and above that which her own merits had won for her.

At all events, it was impossible for Hester to imagine a kinder hostess; Grace and Marion, her girls, vied with their mother in making their guest happy. These young ladies had both pursuits of their own besides a moderate love of reading. They did not rise in the morning with the apprehension that the day might not bring forth some excitement for them; and they had other topics of conversation than the shortcomings of their friends. Hester had suffered no ill-effects from the

social atmosphere to which she had been of late accustomed, but she felt that this one was more wholesome and less artificial, more rarefied and less airified. The young ladies she had hitherto mingled with, compared with these, were as the flowers in Crummock House conservatory to those grown in the open air. Amusement was not so greedily grasped at by her present friends, but when it came it was quite as welcome to them, and enjoyed much more from its comparative infrequency.

'Come, girls, here is a treat for you,' exclaimed Mrs. West, as she laid down a letter she had just received, on the breakfast table, one morning; 'you have got an invitation to a Greenwich dinner on Thursday.'

'Oh! mamma, how charming!' Whitebait they knew; indeed, they could cook it admirably, and prided themselves with reason on the accomplishment, but in its

proper habitat—Greenwich—they had never eaten it.

'Hester smiles at your enthusiasm,' said Mrs. West; 'she is, I am afraid, thoroughly *blasée*; unless we took her for a happy day at Rosherville I can think of no new pleasure to offer her.'

'I was only smiling because the girls looked so pleased,' explained Hester; 'I hope you will all enjoy it very much. As a matter of fact I have never been admitted to that brown-bread-and-butter Paradise, but have been able to survive the exclusion. If you will be so good as to let me invite nurse Arkell, whom I want to have a talk with rather particularly, to take tea with me on Thursday, I shall not envy you one bit.'

'My dear Hester, nothing would induce me to leave you,' said Marion earnestly; 'you shall have nurse Arkell on any other day you please; but on Thursday you and I will be *tête-à-tête*.'

'Excuse me, Marion, but it is my turn to have Hester to myself for an evening,' said Grace quietly. 'Remember I went to the classical music the other night with mamma without a murmur.'

'My dear girls, of course Hester is going with us to Greenwich,' exclaimed Mrs. West. 'She is not only specially included in the invitation, but I have my doubts whether, if she had not been staying with us, we ourselves should have been invited at all. Mrs. Brabazon is a much greater friend of hers than she is of ours. However, it's very kind of her, I'm sure.'

'Mrs. Brabazon! Dear me!' said Grace, 'is it not rather unusual for a lady to give a dinner at Greenwich?'

'It is unusual, you mean, for one to give a dinner to *us*,' returned Marion laughing. 'Come, pray, let us have no scruples. Little fish at Greenwich are very sweet.'

Hester would on the whole have been just

as well content to remain at home with her friends, but seeing the pleasure with which they looked forward to the entertainment, she hastened to express her willingness to join them.

Whether it was unusual for ladies to give dinners at Greenwich or not, it is certain that no one was ever so surprised at such a circumstance as was Mrs. Brabazon at finding herself the dinner-giver. She would as soon have thought—had the suggestion of such a thing depended on herself—of instituting a private bull-fight at Prince's, and sending out cards of invitation for *that.* It was not only Mr. Digby Mason's own idea, but his dinner.

'I want to pay off a few old scores in the way of hospitality to some family folks,' he had casually remarked to her, 'and I think a dinner at Greenwich would be a good way of doing it.'

'It would be a very expensive way,' Mrs. Brabazon had prudently observed; but in the

end she had not only, as usual, given in to her nephew's views, but had decided to give the dinner on her own account.

This exactly suited Mr. Mason's views, for though, to do him justice, he never let money stand in the way of his inclinations, he foresaw that an invitation from his aunt would have a much better chance of acceptance by the person for whom his hospitality was planned than if it should come from himself; while, at the same time, he would have all the advantage which the position of founder of the feast would give him. If all the other good people had snapped at his (white) bait with the exception of Hester Darrell it would have been a fiasco, and a dampish party with a most lugubrious host would probably have come of it; but his plans, as we have seen, were too well laid for that. Mrs. Brabazon was not more favourable to his views as regarded Hester than before, but such was his influence over her when he chose to exert it, that he

had thus actually made her the instrument of his wishes. She had even found out for him that the Wests were disengaged on the Thursday evening, so as to do away with the risks of a short invitation.

When they and their guest were secured, it was easy to make up the rest of the party, for, notwithstanding that it is the fashion to abuse Greenwich dinners, and to find fault, not without reason, with the troublesomeness of transit and the food when we get there, they are in fact, especially with ladies, a very popular institution. There is something fresh and free about them, or, at all events, something different from the dull, eternal round of dinner-parties in town. They have a smack of the picnic about them without its inconveniences, and a *soupçon* of Bohemianism without its vulgar adjunct of economy. I am afraid, indeed, that otherwise well-principled persons of the softer sex have been known to throw over a previous engagement of the conventional

kind for the sake of the (brown) loaves and fishes at the Ship or the Trafalgar.

At all events Mr. Digby Mason, *per* his indulgent aunt, found no difficulty in filling up the table at a few days' notice with fitting guests of both sexes. Of those known to us the Colonel of course was invited, while equally of course Mr. Philip Langton and Lord Thirlmere were not. Mrs. Brabazon (poor woman) had afterwards to explain to Lady Buttermere, who would, she knew, have enjoyed it all exceedingly (and her husband even more so, for nothing pleased him more than to discourse to his neighbours on the cost of a feast which he thought their host was not justified in incurring), that she 'really did not venture to ask her ladyship on such a very short invitation.' Everyone in the shape of a rival was carefully excluded from Mr. Digby Mason's list of guests, though it was almost as long as the menu itself, for he well understood that, next to a *tête-à-tête*, for an opportunity of

making oneself particularly agreeable to any particular person, is a large party.

The dinner was at a comparatively early hour, but long before it was concluded the shades of evening had fallen on the river, and the stars came out, not only in the sky, but on the forehead of the great ships going to and fro upon the silent highway; a time and scene in which even the commonplace have a tendency to become romantic, and conversation insensibly takes a tinge from the 'every-day miracles' that are going on without. They were not without their effect on Hester, who had never seen those huge black steamers with their living freights fresh from the wonders of the deep, returning home, perhaps after long years, with that monotonous beat which has been pulsing on ever since they left far-distant shores; or the merchant ships, with their unknown but costly cargoes, towed slowly to their moorings, or to swell the stately fleet that crowds the docks, by the brave tugs

panting as though their little hearts would break. On one side of the room stretched a huge mirror, so that those who, like their host, had their backs to the river, should not be deprived of this fine, and indeed elsewhere unparalleled spectacle. There was a ceaseless talk all round the table, and Mr. Digby Mason could speak with his fair neighbour with almost as little chance of being overheard as though they were alone.

'I think you enjoy this—I mean the shipping and the scene without,' he said. 'I felt that you would do so even before you came.'

'It is impossible not to be impressed by it,' she replied; 'perhaps I should enjoy it more if I saw papa looking better. I am glad he is going to Brighton to-morrow instead of Bognor, which I am told is dull. He seems not only unwell but distrait and in bad spirits to-night—don't you think so?'

She must have been very much struck by his appearance, or she would hardly have

called Mr. Mason's attention to it; it was a speech the nearest approach to being a confidence that she had yet addressed to him, and his vanity caused him to mistake the cause. He glanced towards the Colonel with an air of sympathy, but could hardly banish from his tone the exultation of his heart as he replied, 'Do you really think so? To me he looks much the same as he usually does at similar entertainments. The fact is, your excellent father is rather easily bored, and with Lady Simpson on one side of him, and Mrs. General Burke (as she calls herself) on the other, he is not very happily situated.'

To say truth the Colonel looked quite unconscious of the presence of either of his neighbours, or indeed of the company generally. His eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the river, and a cloud of profound melancholy sat upon his brow; it had been so throughout the dinner, and when now and then his glance had wandered unobserved to his daughter, so far

from gaining comfort there the sombre expression of his face had deepened. It was not annoyance it manifested—such as the sight of Mr. Mason's attentions to her, which were obvious enough, might possibly have aroused—but positive pain.

'He is not bored,' answered Hester gravely, 'or at least it is not only that; I am sure there is something weighing on his mind.'

'I am afraid Fortune has not been very kind to him lately,' said Mr. Mason gently.

There was a long pause; he was wondering whether he had made a false move or not, in hinting ever so slightly at the Colonel's embarrassments.

There was fear in her reply when it did come, and also a certain hesitation in its tone, as though she were doubtful of her right to speak upon such a subject to anyone. 'Do you mean that he has lost money—at cards?'

'I fear so; and then there was that unfortunate Derby horse the other day. Such

things, however, must happen to everyone who plays or makes a bet; it is the fortune of war; next week, no doubt, things will come all right again.'

He meant to inspire cheerfulness, but his words had a directly contrary effect. If a week could set matters right which were evidently so important and had had so depressing an effect upon her father, it was clear to poor Hester that he must be daily playing for very large sums. She had shut her eyes to this rather than been absolutely ignorant of it, but this sudden revelation shocked her, so much so that for the moment she forgot that the subject was hardly one to be discussed with a third person.

'I know nothing of all these things, Mr. Mason,' she said quietly, and with a little sigh. Her companion was one who was rarely touched by sentiment—he had indeed long been lost to it—yet her simplicity moved him.

'It is better so,' he answered softly; 'the

less young ladies concern themselves with such matters the better.'

'I am afraid dear papa is very fond of cards.'

It was a question singularly inopportune to his remark; but she had hardly listened to it, indeed hardly knew that she herself was making one; she was soliloquising rather than speaking.

'Well, he likes his rubber; so do most of his friends, myself included. Luck varies of course, but sometimes ill-fortune seems to pursue a man. Who is it who has written about it—

> "Whom unmerciful disaster
> Pursues fast and ever faster?"

It is a very lugubrious poem.'

'You know about it all, I suppose?' murmured Hester, almost below her breath.

'About what?'

'About dear papa.'

'I know he has been very unfortunate;

but pray do not let that distress you. It is only a temporary matter; and besides'—here he dropped his voice, and spoke with great earnestness and significance—'I can promise you, even if it should prove otherwise, that I would —well, take care of him and see him through it.'

'I don't understand you.'

It was no wonder. Mr. Digby Mason could not himself understand how he could have been such a fool as to use such terms, or rather to have placed himself in a position from which he could not extricate himself without using them, nor perhaps even then.

'I mean,' he stammered out, 'that I have some little influence with him, which I will take care to use for good.'

A thought flashed across Hester's mind, which a second's reflection would have prevented her from uttering; but she was no longer mistress of herself. She felt as though in the flower-strewn pathway of her existence

a chasm had suddenly opened, and a morbid desire seized her to know its breadth and depth. At the same instant she remembered that it had struck her more than once that the relations between this man and her father, though close enough, had also been somewhat strained. What could he mean by hinting as he had done that he could avert misfortune from him? As to his having any influence over him for good, as he called it, she did not believe it, and she resented the idea.

'Does my father owe you money, Mr. Mason?' If that A 1 emigrant ship, 'A King of Diamonds,' bound for Melbourne direct, which happened to be passing down the river at that moment, had altered its course and pushed its huge bowsprit through the window, the circumstance could not have filled Mr. Digby Mason with greater astonishment than this unexpected inquiry. A practised fencer exchanging a few passes with a tyro could not have felt more amazed at receiving from him

a thrust which broke down his guard and brought the button on to his very heart.

'Money! no,' he answered bluntly. Then like one who recovers himself after having tripped, he added hastily, 'Even if it were so, would it be right to tell you? What would your father say?'

He could not have found a more powerful weapon in the whole armoury of logic than that. It was now Hester's turn to be routed by a simple inquiry. She answered nothing, 'If I were your father's creditor, Miss Darrell,' he went on with earnest tenderness, 'I hope you cannot imagine that I would permit him to feel one moment's uneasiness on that account. Even if he were not my friend, the fact that you are his daughter——'

'I was wrong, Mr. Mason,' she interrupted hastily; 'I had no right to ask any such question, and it needs no reply of any sort,' she added emphatically.

There was a lull in the general conversa-

tion, and her neighbour, a young guardsman, on the other side, took the opportunity to address her. He had been waiting for it for some time, and searching in his mind for an appropriate observation.

'Interesting, very, all these ships and things,' he said, 'are they not? Precious glad those poor emigrant people must be to get home again, I should think.'

'No doubt, only that particular ship is going out,' said Hester smiling; 'you have forgotten that we see them in the looking-glass, and that all our sentiments are inverted.'

'Why, so they are!' muttered the guardsman. 'Been wasting all my sympathies for the last two hours on the wrong people.'

He spoke afterwards with great admiration of the intelligence which had freed Hester from this optical delusion, and also of her readiness in repartee, but he little guessed how much presence of mind had been really necessary for

that little speech of hers, or what effort it had cost her.

The next moment that significant smile and bow, which is the signal for retreat among the Amazons, was given by Mrs. Brabazon, and she was enabled to escape from the table. In the ante-room she bade good-bye to her father. 'I am going down to Brighton to-morrow, you remember, my darling,' he said, and she fancied (or did it only strike her so afterwards?) that his voice was tremulous as well as tender.

'But you will not be there long, dear papa? That is, I hope you will find yourself quite well in a few days.'

'No; I shall not be there long,' he answered quietly.

'We will take the greatest care of your Hester, Colonel,' said Mrs. West smiling; 'and the longer you leave her with us the better we shall be pleased.'

'Thank you for all your kindness to her, present and to come,' said the Colonel. A

speech, or rather a whisper, which, accompanied as it was by a squeeze of the good lady's hand, impressed her not a little by its unusual demonstrativeness.

Mr. Digby Mason, in his capacity of host, accompanied the ladies to their carriage, but ere it drove off the Colonel was at the window and Hester leant out of it to give him one more kiss. 'Upon my word, Miss Hester, you have a devoted father,' observed Mrs. West as they drove away. Her sharp eyes had noticed tears in the Colonel's eyes, of which a separation, caused by a visit to Brighton, seemed certainly an insufficient explanation; on the other hand, after a dinner at Greenwich, she reflected, it was the nature of some men to become abnormally sentimental.

CHAPTER XVII.

BEFORE BREAKFAST.

THE Colonel did not return to the dining-room, notwithstanding that the reign of King Havannah, to whom he was so loyal a subject, had long begun there; for at Greenwich ladies are always kind to this foible of the other sex, or perhaps it is that those who are not so are carefully excluded from its festivities. He walked to the station and took the train to London, and then walked to Welham Street. Simple as such proceedings were, they were uncommon with him. He seldom walked at all, and still more seldom alone. His company was always sought after, except by himself. That he should go home at eleven o'clock at night or so was still more unusual. As he passed

the 'Pick,' the porter, who was enjoying the summer weather outside the door, stepped back respectfully to give him admittance, but he walked on with a 'Good night.'

The Colonel, unlike his class, had generally a pleasant word for his inferiors, which, together with his open-handedness, made him very popular with them. He was popular with most people, and had never done any wilful, or at least gratuitous harm to any man, save himself, in his life.

> He did not do much harm nor yet much good,
> And might have been much better if he would,

is an epitaph which, with the same exception, may be written with truth on most of our graves. I am even inclined to believe, taking human nature as we most of us find it, that the Colonel, notwithstanding his terrible errors, was morally above the average. He had not, it is true, put himself in the way (that is, *out* of the way) to listen to the cry of the poor, but he had never turned a deaf ear to it. It may

be said, indeed, 'that is easy; with money in one's pocket it is less trouble and less painful to give to those who are in need of it than not to give.' But, as a matter of fact, many people of much better 'principles' and infinitely more respectable than the Colonel, find it easier to button their pockets. I have heard it said, I am sorry to say, from the pulpit, that charity of this sort is wholly without merit, and merely an instinct of compassion implanted in us to prevent the world from becoming what Lord Feenix used to call 'another place.' Yet I have known some very regular church-goers without the instinct. If we cannot be charitable, at least let us be honest. This man had good grain in his character, or at least had had till he himself sowed the tares that choked it. Moreover, it behoves us to be pitiful, and in all London town there was no man, nay, no woman, walking its streets that night, more utterly hopeless and miserable than Richard Darrell.

He had put the latch-key into his door, but took it out again and walked round to Philip Langton's lodgings; the windows were dark, as he expected them to be, and in answer to his inquiry he was told that his friend was not within. He knew where to find him well enough, but it was where he did not choose to seek him. Perhaps (he reflected) it was better so, yet if he had found him at home it is possible that a certain dread resolve which he had in his mind might have been postponed or averted. These things are beyond us. The turning to the right hand or to the left, the starting from our home five minutes earlier or five minutes later, involve to men every day the issues of life and death. In the case of the individual, though the Insurance Companies can calculate it for their clients within a fraction, there is no such thing as comparative peril.

The Colonel returned home, like one who walks in a dream—the people he met or

passed had no existence for him—and went up at once to his own room, a small apartment at the back of the house, very quiet and looking on to a blank wall; the same sort of view that he had in his own mind, for he had a sensation, when he was not actively engaged in thought, of some huge barrier being built up around him which was gradually shutting out the view. He sat down at his table and unlocked a desk where lay certain documents carefully arranged and docketed, his will, and the policy of his life assurance; there was also some letters all in feminine hands—a few from his dead wife tied together with black ribbon. That the Colonel should have kept such relics, and with such solicitude, would have seemed amazing even to his dearest friend; but even one's nearest and dearest do not (which is sometimes fortunate) know everything about us.

All the letters that Hester had ever written to him, from her first efforts, after her en-

franchisement from pot-hooks and hangers, to the last note she had sent from Mrs. West's house, were there; written by no means in such a hand as that attributed to women by the poet, 'as when a field of corn bows all its ears before the roaring east,' but in one particularly distinct and bold. He knew most of their contents by heart, but had it not been so, could certainly not have read them now. The very look of the packet, with its gay red ribbon round it, gave him a sharp pain, far worse than any sword could have done, for he survived it. There was also one other letter; it was nearly twenty years old, but not much creased, nor bearing, as the rest did, any evidences of reperusal. He took it out and straightened it, then read it aloud. 'You villain,' it ran, 'I have nothing to reply to your letter. You would have me wish you joy it seems; I wish you such joy as you deserve, and can hardly wish you worse.' It had no signature except 'Elizabeth,' as though

the writer had been a queen. This idea, indeed, seemed to strike the reader, for he murmured to himself with a brief smile, 'It might have been Elizabeth writing to Essex.' Then he tore it into small pieces and threw it into the empty grate with the reflection, 'I wonder whether her resentment will live beyond the grave? It ought not to do so. It was utterly unjustifiable.'

For a few moments he fell into a train of thought, which, though on a subject disagreeable enough, was welcome as compared with the other thoughts that were waiting their turn for admittance into his mind. They were not clamorous, nor vehement, but showed a certain patient importunity that was not to be denied. They resembled an eager but silent crowd, waiting at the doors of some theatre, who, at the first opening of it, stream in and fill the whole house from pit to gallery; only, instead of being in holiday garb they were all clothed in black raiment.

These unseen visitants made sleep impossible to the Colonel, who nevertheless arose in the morning to all appearance much the same as usual. His physical condition was in subjugation to that of his mind, which was in an abnormal and, so to speak, magnified state. External affairs had ceased to affect him, or at least to affect him in the usual way. Had any misfortune or catastrophe now occurred to him, it would no more have disturbed him than a deadly poison affects a man who has lock-jaw. He was in that condition to which medical science has given the name of 'tolerance.'

Still he transacted his ordinary affairs as usual. He had discharged his valet when his daughter had come to live with him (rather because it was more convenient to do without him in so small a house than from any motive of economy), so permitted nurse Arkell, to her huge delight, to pack his portmanteau for him. He remained at home all day—notwithstand-

ing that he had told his daughter that he should leave town early—moving aimlessly about the house, or drumming on the window-frame as he stared idly out of window, and took the afternoon train for Brighton. He had no difficulty, by the usual means, of securing a compartment to himself. It was an express train, but his thoughts went faster far: to the home of his boyhood, to India, to yesterday's dinner at Greenwich. Even his school-days recurred to him. Every incident of his life seemed to flash before him as distinctly as the panorama of the country through which he flew. All things without had a sense of unreality he had never observed in them before; the objects on his mental retina only appeared to have any substance.

At Brighton he put up at an hotel, not the one he generally used, but a smaller and more quiet one, on the East Cliff. The town had an attraction for him which it had never had before, as he walked out before dinner. The

pier, the people, and even the shops, he regarded with a new sort of attention, though when he met any acquaintance, which he did more than once, he seemed to have a difficulty in recalling his identity. What was still more unusual with him, the objects of nature riveted his attention: the sea with its distant horizon, the clouds with their silent yet majestic march; and the illimitable sky.

A boatman came up to him as he was returning to his hotel and inquired if he would have a sail.

'Not to-day,' replied the Colonel. 'You may, however, take me out for a bathe to-morrow morning. Let us say half-past seven,' which was accordingly agreed upon.

It was a lovely evening, and after dinner, of which he partook very sparingly, he went out again. This time he left the town behind him, and after a mile or two's walk in the direction of Rottingdean, sat down beside the sea, listening to its monotonous moan, and looking up at the

quiet stars, which seemed to be watching him in their turn. A line of some forgotten poem came into his mind. He had never learnt a poem in his life to his knowledge, and, indeed, hardly read one, yet the fragment of this one haunted him—

The sentinel stars set their watch in the sky.

Perhaps he had not got the line right; sentinels did not set their own watch, he reflected, yet the idea monopolised him. Why was their watch set, and on whom? They were the outposts, as he had a vague idea, of numberless hosts of unseen stars, other worlds, and larger ones than our own: places where they didn't have any Derbies or play picquet, perhaps; indeed, very likely. What were they like? he wondered.

Presently the moon rose; how quiet it looked, as it flooded earth and sea with its silent splendour. He had seen it, of course, a thousand times before, but it had never looked

so pure and beautiful. It struck him that he had missed many such glorious sights in life, which had lain, if not about his feet, above his head, and had only required an upward glance for their appreciation. He felt regretfully that it was a pity, but it was too late for all that now. The night was far advanced ere he turned his steps towards the town, and the sleepy waiter yawned as he opened the hotel door for him.

'I am sorry to have kept you up,' said the Colonel.

'It's no matter, sir. What time will you have breakfast to-morrow morning?'

Breakfast? That was the very last thing he would have thought of had it not been suggested to him. The incongruousness of it with what he had in his mind evoked a bitter smile.

'Well, I am going out for an early bathe; let us say nine o'clock.'

'Very good, sir.'

So abnormal was the state of the Colonel s feelings that even this conversation with the waiter had its impression on them. As he was turning away he put half-a-crown into the man's hand. 'That is because you sat up for me,' he explained. The waiter thought it odd at the time, since the gentleman might have given it him when he left the hotel, but afterwards he had reason to think it a fortunate circumstance.

At nine o'clock next morning the breakfast was ready in No. 14, the Colonel's sitting-room, which looked out to sea, and the waiter was watching for him through the window. The porter had let him out about the hour that he had fixed for his bathe, and it was high time that he should have returned. There was a letter on the table, doubtless written overnight, and addressed to Philip Langton, Esq., Mayfair, which the waiter hardly knew whether to post or not before the gentleman came in. Presently he noticed a crowd of fishermen talking eagerly

together on the beach, and as it was a very slack time at the hotel, and curiosity, or, as he subsequently explained it, 'a sort of presentiment,' overcame him, he stepped out to inquire what it meant. It meant that the lodger in No. 14 would not be in to breakfast, nor would ever be seen alive again. He had been rowed out to sea according to his wishes, had undressed and taken an header into the water, but whether from cramp or from some other cause, he had not reappeared. The boatman rowed about for a long time, but without seeing any traces of his fare. The body, he said, would probably come ashore at a certain place at such a time, according to the set of the tide; but it was fortunate he saw the waiter, as otherwise he would not have known who the gentleman was, or where he came from.

The hotel-keeper was equally ignorant, but under the circumstances he made bold to open the letter lying on the table in No. 14. It only

contained a few lines of commonplace correspondence, with the remark that the sea air was already doing the writer good, but it enabled Philip Langton to be informed by telegram that his friend Colonel Richard Darrell had been accidentally drowned that morning while bathing from a boat off Brighton beach.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NURSE ARKELL.

UPON the whole it is with reason that Sudden Death is included in our liturgy, even with Murder, as a catastrophe to be prayed against. To the individual perhaps it may seem desirable, since the pain and weariness of illness, and all those melancholy signs—too prolonged for wholesome warnings—which often attend the break up of our poor tenements of clay, are thereby dispensed with; but to the survivors the suddenness of the calamity increases the shock of it tenfold.

The case is parallel with that of commercial ruin, which, however painful may have been its slow but sure approach to those who have the conduct of affairs, falls, when it does fall, with

more terrific force upon their families, who have been in no expectation of the blow. And sometimes, alas! with sudden death comes sudden ruin also.

There is no greater penalty paid for friendship than the obligation it lays us under to reveal the fact of the death of a friend to those dear and near to him. Exceptionally fortunate is the man of mature years to whom such a task has never fallen. It is bad enough if the misfortune has been foreshadowed by illness, but in that case the message of woe requires to be but half told; long-brooding apprehension on the part of the bereaved one helps us out with it. 'We have bad news,' we say, or our face says it for us, and there is little need to particularise; it is only that what has been so long looked for has come at last. But when there has been no warning, when the father has passed away at his desk in the city, called suddenly to his own account; or the husband is cut short in his forensic speech and is sum-

moned by death before another judge; or the bridegroom is killed in falling from his horse at the very moment 'when, thinking this will please him best,' his loved one 'takes a ribbon or a rose——' then, indeed, is the man who has to tell the news only less to be pitied than she who receives it from his lips.

The fatal telegram had come to Philip Langton when sitting at a late breakfast. He had opened it carelessly enough; not because he was much accustomed to have telegrams, but because he flattered himself that no news he could receive could be of any special importance. He had been wounded early in the battle of life; if not vitally, yet so seriously that his existence had henceforth 'crept on a broken wing,' and whatever else might befall him seemed of comparatively small account. His friends called him philosophic, whereas he was only cynically incredulous that Fate, having once shot that poisoned dart at him of which we are cognisant, had any other in her

quiver capable of hurting him. A foolish thought, indeed, for one with a heart so large and tender, and therefore especially open to her shafts.

Even the club bachelor, the man who plumes himself on his immunity from the emotions, and who carries all he cares for 'beneath his hat,' as the phrase goes, has some difficulty in establishing such a complete system of quarantine as to shut out all infection of sympathy; and how, therefore, could this man, who had a soft spot in his heart even for the woman who had been his ruin, and loved his friend and his friend's daughter, hope for exemption? If indeed he had persuaded himself that it was so, that telegram shattered his fool's paradise.

Darrell dead! Darrell drowned! The news appalled him, and seemed absolutely too horrible to be true. That 'in the midst of life we are in death' is a circumstance, of course, known to those even who are no students of the Scrip-

tures, but when some private calamity brings the fact home to us it seems a new thing. Moreover, that this man should die was so inexpressibly anomalous and unsuitable; a man in no way connected as it were with the catastrophe of death, who never spoke of it, probably never thought of it, and who was always associated with good health and the pursuits of pleasure. He had not, it is true, been very well just lately, but that had nothing to do with this catastrophe.

'Drowned whilst bathing from a boat off Brighton beach.' Drowned, drowned!

These thoughts, which take so long to tell, took not a second to think, and in the same second were joined by another thought no wit less terrible: 'The dead man's daughter must be told.' This obvious duty, though the very idea of it made him sick at heart, Philip Langton recognised at once. There was, however, time to spare; the ill news that would fly so fast in Pall Mall—Colonel Darrell's death was

probably 'posted up' at his club at that very moment—would reach Bayswater on a more tardy wing. He knew it was not Mrs. West's custom to come into town in the forenoon, and at all events he might venture, without danger of the girl hearing what had happened from other lips, on going first to Welham Street. It was even possible that he might learn there that there had been some mistake—that the news he had received was not quite so black as the hotel-keeper had painted it; but of that he had little hope. The very fact of the telegram having been addressed to himself showed that liberties had been taken with the Colonel's letters, which would hardly have been used had not his death been beyond a doubt.

The house in Welham Street was looking as usual, its eyes unshuttered and none of that suggestion of calamity about it which even dead walls can give. The door was opened to him by a maid-servant and not by the man

whose duty it was to do so, but who had taken advantage of the absence of the master and mistress to go himself for a holiday. Nurse Arkell, however, a retainer of a very different stamp, was at home, and Langton asked to have a few words with her. She came down to him in the dining-room with an undisturbed face, for she was accustomed to her master's friend and thought it not unlikely he might have some commands for her from the Colonel or Hester.

'You have had no news from Brighton, I suppose, nurse?' he said with grave significance.

'No, sir, none.' His manner had not awakened the suspicions he had intended it to do; not that nurse Arkell for all her superstition was deficient in intellect, but because it requires some familiarity, which the difference in their positions denied in this case, to detect gradations of tone.

'There *is* news, I am sorry to say; very bad news.'

The old woman looked up at him quickly and read the truth in his face, which was at once reflected in her own.

'Oh, not the master, sir?' she pleaded in a quavering voice inexpressibly touching; it had the loyalty of a life in it; 'for mercy's sake do not tell me that any harm has come to the master.'

'Would that I could help it, nurse. I would lose my right hand rather than have it to tell, but this telegram has just come from Brighton.'

He held it out to her, but she shrank from his outstretched hand. 'There is no need to show it me,' she answered bitterly, 'he is dead and drowned.'

'Then you did know it?'

'I knew it when you said there was news from the sea, but not before. It is the Luck of the Darrells—Oh, my dear young mistress, my pretty, pretty Hester!'

Nurse Arkell had sunk into a chair and

covered her grey face with her trembling hands; they had done a great deal of work in their time, and had a less dainty sense of some things than those of her companion, perhaps, but the hearts of both were at once wrung by the same solicitude for the same object. Those simple words of the old woman, 'My pretty, pretty Hester!' utterly broke down the strong man's fortitude, and the tears coursed freely down his cheeks. Just so much only of his characteristic reserve was left as caused him to turn the key of the door so as to prevent intrusion.

'We must do what we can for her, we two, nurse Arkell,' he said gently, 'though we can never make up to her for the poor Colonel.'

'Never, never,' cried the old woman passionately. 'There was none like him; none so good and kind. I have known him from his birth, sir, and never had a cross word from him. . . . The best of men.'

The eulogy was more exaggerated even

than is the way of epitaphs, yet it was absolutely genuine. Very much better men have gone to their graves without so favourable a verdict from any they have left behind them. Nor is it for us poor mortals to decide what attributes in the eyes of the All Wise are excluded from the list of virtues.

'When did it happen, sir?' inquired the old woman after a long pause. Her voice, though it still trembled, was no longer broken by sobs; the waters of old age, though sunless, are exempt from the tempest, or if it sweep them it is soon quelled.

'He was drowned from a boat this very morning.'

'This morning, from a boat?' repeated the old woman incredulously; 'that does not look like my poor master; to be up, and out, and on the water too, so early.'

'He was bathing from a boat before breakfast, and, as I suppose, was seized by cramp.'

'It is impossible,' cried nurse Arkell ex-

citedly. 'He could not have bathed from a boat, my master could never swim a stroke in his life; I have often heard him lament it. When at Eton he had a fever (I nursed him through it), which caused him to be forbidden to learn to swim, and he never did learn it.'

Philip Langton's face grew very pale. 'Are you quite sure of this, nurse?' he inquired very solemnly.

'I am as sure of it as that I sit here, sir.'

'Then if you would have your master's memory respected, say nothing of this to any human being,' he continued earnestly.

'Respected! why should it not be respected? Whose memory could be more worthy of respect?' argued the old woman indignantly.

'Still, if you tell folks that he could not swim, they will call him selfish.'

'Selfish! why he never thought of self. He only lived for Miss Hester.'

'And *died* for her,' was the reply that

might well have risen to Langton's lips. Nurse Arkell's statement about the Colonel's not being able to swim was a revelation to him. He comprehended at once all that had happened, and why it had happened. The old woman's simplicity was fortunately too great to lead her to the same conclusion; when once the manner of the Colonel's death should be admitted, it would be easy to persuade her that the selfishness of which he had spoken as likely to be imputed to his friend lay in the risk he had run in bathing too far from shore; her tongue would then be sealed for her master's sake, and especially in her communications with her young mistress. The immediate necessity of insuring the old woman's silence postponed, as it were, for Philip Langton the shock of her unconscious disclosure; but it pressed upon him with frightful persistence. It was, he was convinced, no accidental death that his friend had met with; and if not accidental, how urgent and deplorable must have been the cir-

cumstances which had led him to so fatal a step! The investigation of them, however, must be postponed; the first thing to be done, as he told his companion, was to break the terrible tidings to Hester.

'I was going up to Mrs. West's this very morning,' said the old woman; 'she kindly told me I might bring my work and spend an hour or two with my young mistress. Alack! alack! she little thought the news I was to bring her.'

'Still it must be brought, nurse Arkell,' sighed Langton, 'and I don't know where a kinder or more considerate messenger than yourself could be found. I shall go with you, of course.'

'Oh, sir, that is very kind of you,' exclaimed the old woman gratefully. 'I don't know how I should ever have had the courage to do it alone.'

'And yet you have more courage than I have,' said Philip Langton frankly.

'Nay, nay, sir, my heart is well-nigh breaking within me, but what I feel is that the master would have wished me to bear up for Miss Hester's sake, and that gives me strength.'

To have told nurse Arkell that she was the embodiment of duty would have certainly puzzled, and probably offended her, but she was one of those people who, without 'talking *poetry* all their lives without knowing it,' play in life a noble part quite unconsciously, and for the most part without appreciation, unless, indeed, from an unseen audience that may be watching our earthly drama. For the moment Philip Langton realised and acknowledged this; in the great shadow that had fallen upon that house all lesser shadows, such as those of degree, were lost, and he impulsively took the old woman's hand in his and pressed it.

'If you will put your bonnet on we will take a cab to Bayswater at once, nurse.'

The incongruity of the companionship did not strike him at the time at all, but it struck

Mrs. West, who from the drawing-room window saw the cab stop and Philip Langton, followed by nurse Arkell, get out of it.

'Good heavens! Grace, there must be some bad news for Hester.'

Hester was in the girls' boudoir with Marion, and thither, after some delay and much anxious questioning, the news of her visitor's arrival was brought her. With that piteous promptness to credit calamity which comes to us only too early, one glance at nurse Arkell's face made her heart sink within her. She at once exclaimed, 'Something has happened to papa! What is it?'

'God give you strength to bear it, Miss Hester.'

'I can bear anything but suspense.' Then, with pathetic inconsistency she added, 'Not dead! Oh, do not tell me *that*; not dead.'

Yet, even while she pleaded, she felt that her appeal was vain, and that her father was no longer among the living. Strange to say,

though her mind was so swift to comprehend the catastrophe itself, its circumstances she found it difficult to realise.

'Dead, dead,' she kept muttering to herself despairingly, but never 'drowned.' The reflection was thus spared to her, and it was no small mercy, that those loved remains were at that moment swaying somewhere with the swaying tides; the 'hands so often clasped in hers tossing with tangle and with shell.' She had only some dim conviction that she could not get at him; the overwhelming sense of loss did away for the present with all impression of detail. For the moment she did not even picture to herself her own orphaned condition. She only recognised, as beneath the long white sheet which is poor humanity's last covering, we recognise what lies there, that her 'dear young papa' was dead and had left her world a blank.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SOFT-HEARTED TRUSTEE.

In the method which Colonel Darrell had chosen for leaving the world, it is probable, since other considerations besides selfish ones certainly moved him, that he had intended to give as little trouble as possible; but as many things 'gang a-gley' with us in our plans and desires, while alive, it is not surprising that matters turn out contrary to our expectations after death—such, for example, as coming ashore again when we fancy we have left earth for good and all. As the boatman had prophesied, the sea gave up her dead at a certain time and place, and the 'it' which had been 'he' was carried back to the hotel, where Philip Langton reverently awaited it. How

terrible are such meetings, with their unwonted pathos and demonstrativeness on one side, and their still more unwonted impassivity and apathy on the other! The sole satisfaction permitted to Langton was that he had persuaded Hester that no such meeting was possible, and had therefore induced her to remain in town when he took the afternoon train for Brighton.

How cruel it is to rob us of the picture we have fondly made for ourselves of some lost and loved one, to hang for ever in the long galleries of memory, by substituting for it the image which decay has touched! For the purpose of identification, such an ordeal must be in some cases endured, but very often it is unnecessarily suggested and insisted upon. Philip Langton suffered as perhaps few men would have suffered from such an experience, but so much the more he congratulated himself that Hester had been spared it. His own presence on the spot, independent of the obligations of friendship, was absolutely necessary. There

would, of course, be an inquest, and who so competent to give evidence respecting his dead friend as himself? above all, who so conscious of the necessity for silence upon certain subjects? As the case appeared to the outside world, nothing could be simpler, and before the public investigation took place the whole matter had disclosed itself with equal simplicity to Langton; only the conclusions that were thus severally arrived at were wholly different.

Langton was quite convinced that his friend had voluntarily and designedly met his death by drowning, and that he had been led to do so by remorse upon his daughter's account, whose entire fortune (i.e. the money he had always intended to leave her) he had squandered. On the other hand, by his death he had provided her with 5,000*l.*, the amount of his life insurance; and this, by the terms of the policy, would not be forfeited, even though he should be proved to have committed suicide. Langton recollected his friend having alluded

to this fact, with the subsequent catastrophe even then no doubt in his mind. It seemed to him, indeed, that the Colonel's proceedings had for some time been leading up to it. His placing his daughter with Mrs. West upon pretence of going for his health to the seaside, the arrangement of his correspondence and of his affairs, which Langton had, as his executor, investigated, all pointed to this, down to the letter left behind him at the hotel addressed to Langton himself, and which obviously was written for that very purpose of identification to which it was subsequently put.

Nor could it be argued that the motive, from the poor Colonel's point of view at least, was insufficient. From the statement of his accounts it appeared that when the fatal act had been committed he had become almost penniless, and that from the policy of his assurance certain debts would have to be deducted which would reduce Hester's means to still smaller proportions. As to his losses at the

card-table and on the race-course, those, it was to be presumed, had been settled as they arose, but that they had been very considerable of late was now a matter of common talk, a rumour very annoying to Langton, not only as likely to grievously offend Hester's ears should it ever reach them, but also, which was of still more consequence, to affect the result of the inquest by suggesting a motive of self-destruction. As regards the latter matter, however, no harm came of it, for the coroner's jury came to the conclusion that Colonel Darrell had met with an accidental death. Philip Langton was the only person who knew better, for though, curiously enough, nurse Arkell, as we have seen, had put him in possession of the fact that had convinced him to the contrary, it did not carry that conviction to her own mind. She only thought that the Colonel had been 'reckless' in bathing in deeper water than was safe, and the very circumstance that Langton had described it as an act of selfishness had had the

effect he had intended, and closed the mouth that could never speak but loyally of her dead master.

Thus, thanks to the solicitude of her father's friend, Hester never knew the worst of the matter in connection with her irreparable loss. We say irreparable, for it is not always by our intrinsic worth that our loss is measured by those we leave behind us. The man of genial nature is often more missed than one of better principles, to whom the gift of a kindly manner has been denied; and as regards the world in which Richard Darrell moved, it could certainly be said of it that it could better have spared a better man. There was an unmixed respect for him expressed in the drawing-rooms and at the clubs. At many a house in Belgravia the lady of the house would endeavour to snatch a fleeting reputation by expressing her conviction that the Colonel's like would never sit at her table again; but as in many cases he had only sat there once, and by reason of finding it

a little dull had resolutely refused to come again, it is probable that these disconsolate hostesses experienced the healing effect of time, and forgot him before the week was out. One or two mature ones of the gentler sex (among whom was Mrs. Brabazon) ventured upon even a higher bid for the sympathy of society, and affected to lament the Colonel as one who, if life had been left to him, might have become even nearer and dearer to them than he was. Younger ladies made him a topic in beginning conversation with strange partners or next neighbours at the dinner-table, 'What a sad thing that was about poor Colonel Darrell,' to which the other would reply sympathetically, with perhaps a 'rider' about the strength of the tides at Brighton which they had culled from the inquest.

At the clubs of course the general regret was much more personal. It was admitted on all hands that the Colonel 'was a capital fellow,' 'one in a thousand,' and (with some

confusion of metaphor) 'a man who had always lost his money without turning a hair.' It was whispered of late months he had lost a great deal of money, and that Mr. Digby Mason had won it; which was a pity, as that young gentleman was about the last man to be induced to lose it again. Some quaint expressions which the dead man had been wont to use continued to be quoted for some time with a regretful smile, and might fairly be said to have survived him.

The occasion of his burial was seized upon by half the world of fashion to 'demonstrate,' by wreaths and crosses, not only its respect for the departed, but the serious views it entertained at bottom concerning death and immortality. Engagements of various kinds unfortunately prevented its attendance at the funeral, which took place at Kensal Green, but it was represented by some of the gravest coachmen, the tallest footmen, and the finest carriages and horses in London. Nurse Arkell and Hester, with Mrs. West and Philip Langton, were the

only mourners, but at the cemetery Mr. Digby Mason made his appearance, a circumstance which to those who knew him, had they been aware of the fact, would have caused considerable surprise. Langton resented it exceedingly (though it was not easy to say why), and the more so since this tribute of respect was noted by Hester with approbation. He did not understand that the very fact of her being grateful for so small a service showed how little she expected from him who paid it. The truth was that for the present Hester's regard was only to be won as it were at second-hand, through the memory of her dead father. Her own self was obliterated, and even the affection she felt for Philip Langton was evoked rather by the place he had occupied in the Colonel's heart than by his devotion to her own interests.

It is not every girl who, orphan and desolate, can boast of such a friend; with some, too, pecuniary matters are so pressing that

there is no space permitted for the indulgence in the luxury of grief; they may weep indeed, but they have to 'work and weep' at the same time. There are few things more pitiful than that ignoring of Necessity and the Common Fate which so often happens to widows and orphans suddenly deprived of their natural guardian. They may be quite free from selfishness and egotism, and yet the catastrophe seems to them so appalling as to do away with the ordinary conditions of existence; they live, move, and have their being, in such an atmosphere of mourning, as almost shuts out the sun itself and prevents them from regarding matters with any sense of proportion. This was in some degree the case with Hester; in any other circumstances, she would have been prompt to relieve her friends of all trouble on her account, but a sort of lethargy hung over her, which, with perhaps mistaken kindness, her hostess and her daughters made no effort to dispel.

It was no wonder, therefore, that Philip

Langton, with his delicate sense of what was due to a girl's sorrow, abstained from speaking with her upon business affairs a much longer time than is usual in such cases. He might perhaps have delayed the matter still further, but for a circumstance which accidentally came to his knowledge, and which somewhat piqued as well as pained him. Notwithstanding the seclusion in which, through Mrs. West's consideration and kindness, Hester was permitted to remain, it seemed that she had not denied herself to Mr. Digby Mason; on one occasion, at least, when that gentleman had called he was admitted to her presence and even granted a private interview. 'I was out of the house when Mr. Mason called,' was Mrs. West's explanation of the affair to Philip Langton, 'or should certainly not have permitted her to see him alone. It was injudicious and, under the circumstances, almost compromising, though dear Hester of course was quite unconscious of that.'

'Mr. Mason, however, was not unconscious of it,' observed Mr. Langton drily.

'Well, I don't know; some men are ignorant of everything becoming in a woman except a bonnet. I should be unwilling to think that the thing was done deliberately with the purpose you suggest. However, as far as I can gather, Mr. Mason took nothing by his motion. He had his interview, and it seems to have been a pretty long one, but that was all. Marion happened by chance to be at home, though it had been arranged that she was to accompany Grace and myself into town that afternoon.'

'And Mrs. Brabazon knew it,' put in Langton quickly.

'Why, yes, it was to Mrs. Brabazon's that we were going.'

'Just so; the man knew that the coast was clear.'

'My dear Mr. Langton, you have the intuition of a detective,' observed the lady, smiling.

'I wish I had,' said Philip gravely; 'unhappily I have only the suspicion; pray go on.'

'Well, from Marion's account it would seem that the interview was by no means a tender one. Hester's manner, at least, at parting from her visitor was as cold as an icicle; and what was very curious, his association with the poor Colonel—though we find that the least touch on that string melts the very soul within her—did not seem to have affected her in the least. Moreover, I have observed Hester and this cavalier of hers on other occasions, and so far as an old woman can speak with certainty of a young one in such a matter, I am confident that he has small chance of persuading Hester Darrell to become Mrs. Mason.'

'Heaven forbid!' exclaimed Langton, so earnestly that a suspicion began to dawn in his companion's mind that these close inquiries of his concerning Hester's proceedings were not

altogether disinterested. It was probable that the poor girl was not left too well off; and albeit there was a considerable disproportion as to years, it seemed to Mrs. West—who, like most people, knew nothing of Mr. Langton's circumstances—that Hester might 'do worse' than marry her father's friend. Mrs. West was far too sensible a woman to shut her eyes to facts, and she felt that the loss of the Colonel had depreciated Hester's value in the matrimonial market. The daughters of a bishop are not so much sought after by curates and others when their papa has been translated from his earthly diocese; and so far, if so far only, the Colonel had resembled a bishop—his social position could no longer avail his child.

The morning after the conversation with Mrs. West, Langton called on Hester by appointment, in his character as executor to her father's will. She received him with affectionate respect and expressions of gratitude for all that he had done for her that he

strove in vain to silence, yet her manner was unexpectedly quiet and self-restrained. If it was possible to picture Hester Darrell as a woman of business one might almost have done so, as she sat silent and attentive to every word of Philip Langton's statement of her affairs. He did not go into details, which, indeed, it was most necessary to avoid; it would never have done to let her know, for instance, that all she had in the world was derived from the policy of her father's life insurance, but he put the figures before her with great exactitude.

'You have but a small fortune, my dear,' he observed in conclusion, 'but to a young lady of your simple tastes it will be found sufficient; if my calculations are correct you will have four thousand five hundred and fifty pounds of your own.'

'Can I have this money at once?' inquired Hester quietly.

'The whole of it—the principal?' ex-

claimed Philip Langton in amazement. 'Nay, surely not; it is in my hands in trust for you.'

'I thought, perhaps, papa had left the time for payment of the money to your discretion. Of course I am not of age; but then he never treated me as a child, and I thought —or at least I hoped—that he might have placed an unusual confidence in me; but it was not so, it seems.'

She looked so disappointed and distressed that Langton's heart was touched. He had not the least idea what she could want money for, but he felt certain, from her manner, that it was no trivial sum of which she stood in need, or in fancied need. In character he well knew that Hester, notwithstanding her ignorance of the world, was, as she had expressed it, by no means a child. From the little follies and extravagances to which young ladies are prone she was altogether free; her efforts had always been directed to curtail

rather than to swell, not only their expenses in Welham Street, but those which the Colonel had always been so ready to lavish on her person and her pleasures. It was certainly no mere fancy, therefore, that urged her to apply for funds. There was a tenderness in the tone of her pleading which showed that it came from the heart; but it had nothing of coaxing in it; the matter was evidently too serious and too earnest for cajolery.

Now a man may be an excellent guardian and yet a very indifferent trustee, and such was the case with Philip Langton. He had as much truth and loyalty in his composition as human nature is capable of, but where his affections were concerned he was deficient in firmness. He could 'put his foot down' vehemently enough to stamp out a viper, but if there was any risk of wounding some tender and innocent creature, he walked more delicately than Agag. He was, in short, not one

of those gentry who, being clear about the law being on their side, find it always easy to say 'No.'

Moreover, though the Colonel had made no special proviso such as Hester had hinted at, for her having control of her money before the usual time, Langton was well aware that he would have wished his daughter to be, as far as was reasonable, her own mistress, and the wishes of his dead friend were sacred to him.

'If you will tell me what you want the money for,' said Langton gently, 'and I approve of the purpose to which you would apply it—or even if you chose to make a secret of it and it is not a large sum——'

'It is two thousand pounds,' interrupted Hester gravely.

'Two thousand pounds, Hester!' he echoed in amazement; 'why that is nearly half your fortune. It is quite monstrous, and out of the question that I should advance you any

such sum. What can you possibly want it for?'

The question was a most injudicious one, or, rather, the asking any question was most injudicious. It opened the door for argument after it had been closed.

'It is for a purpose which I am not permitted to mention, Mr. Langton. So far, I feel that my application must needs seem unreasonable. Upon the other hand, I had permitted myself to hope that, from what you know of me, you might have given me credit for—well, no, that would indeed have been to expect too much. Let me say, dear Mr. Langton, that I rather trusted—if I ventured to indulge myself in expectation at all—to the tenderness of your heart. I may, perhaps, be permitted to take it for granted that you consider me incapable of any very egregious act of folly or extravagance. I know you would not think that I asked you for such a sum for the purpose of throwing

it in the gutter; but my chief hope, I acknowledge, was in that personal kindness you have always shown me, and which I thought might be induced to stretch even to this great length.'

'But, my dear girl,' exclaimed Langton, in a tone of such distress that it suggested for its accompaniment the wringing of hands, 'I am not a free agent. If the money were mine—and, indeed, if I had the money, you should be as welcome to it as——'

'Nay, nay, my dear Mr. Langton,' interrupted Hester gravely, 'you must not talk like that, it is painful to me because I believe every word you say. Of course, if the case was as you put it, I should not have opened my mouth; but the money being mine, or rather being about to be mine, and the purpose for which I need it being, I solemnly assure you, the discharge of a sacred obligation——'

'What obligation?' put in Langton. 'Something connected with your dear father?'

'Yes. There, I can tell you no more; and I may have done wrong in telling you that much, but having done so I may add that were my dear papa alive he would, I am quite sure, approve of the object I have in view.'

'It is nurse Arkell,' exclaimed Langton triumphantly; 'you are thinking of making provision for that faithful soul. Now, though that does credit to your feelings, my dear girl, and I cordially sympathise with them, there is a medium in these matters.'

'It is not nurse Arkell, Mr. Langton,' put in Hester quickly. 'I have satisfied myself that she is placed above all reach of want, though far indeed removed from the prosperity she deserves. Pray press me no further. Even at the price of your agreement to my request, I could not in honour explain its cause; imagine, therefore, how distressing must be these questionings, which are made, it seems, without any intention of

acceding to it; nay, I did not mean to be unkind,' she added pathetically, while her eyes filled with tears; 'but it seems so hard to be unable to do what is right and just, even with one's own.'

At the sight of her grief Philip Langton's heart began to melt within him, and to suggest arguments against himself. He imagined it possible that the Colonel had left behind him some secret that had come to his daughter's knowledge, and which involved some shameful but none the less binding obligation; her resolute silence upon the matter, the embarrassment which it obviously caused her, and her extreme solicitude to obtain her object, all combined to corroborate this view of affairs. It was true that Richard Darrell and himself had been close friends; had had, as the phrase goes, no concealments from one another; but there are certain secrets sometimes unshared even between Damon and Pythias. True, it should have struck an

executor that an 'infant' of Hester's age and sex could hardly be a good judge of the merits of a matter in every sense so questionable; but, for the present, Langton was overwhelmed with the reflection how extreme must the necessity of the case have appeared to this poor girl, to compel her to speak to him upon such a subject at all, and what distress of mind she must even at that moment be enduring.

'Though it may "seem hard," you must not think me hard, Hester,' he answered gently; 'the sum you ask for is, as I have said, nearly half your fortune, for the safe custody of which I am answerable. If I were to consent to your request and you were to pay this money away—which I fear it is your intention to do'—here she made a gesture of assent, a grave inclination of the head without a ghost of a smile, which seemed to corroborate all his suspicions—'you would then have scarcely enough left to live upon; it is not as if

you had sisters, each of whom could club their little incomes with your own, and so build comfort as it were out of the very bricks of penury; remember, you are quite alone in the world, Hester.'

'I know it well,' she answered with the first touch of bitterness he had ever heard fall from her lips. 'Still, believe me, with that diminished income of which you speak, and with the consciousness of having done my duty, I shall be happier far than if I had the riches of the Indies, and had neglected it.'

'Everybody will say I am such a fool,' murmured Langton with an air of conviction, 'and everybody for once will be quite right.'

'There will be one person, however,' returned Hester gently, 'a mere girl, it is true, whose opinion is not worth much, but who will to the last hour of her life think otherwise; who will never forget that you put confidence in her when you might reasonably have de-

clined to do so, and lifted a burthen from her heart when no other man in your place would have put forth his little finger to lighten it.'

'Well, well, if nothing else can make you happy, you shall have the money, Hester,' said Langton, smiling and holding out his hand. She seized it eagerly, and before he could prevent her had carried it to her lips.

'If you have not made me happy, dear Mr. Langton,' she said, 'you have at least prevented me from being very, very miserable.'

CHAPTER XX.

LORD BUTTERMERE'S GENEROSITY.

HESTER'S gratitude was not unwelcome to Langton; but the vehemence and earnestness with which she expressed it brought home to him for the first time the importance of the step which he had been induced to take. It is not to be supposed that he had been so selfish as to gratify himself by giving way to her in the matter at her own expense. He was fully resolved to make good, out of his own private means, the sum thus advanced to her. So urgent, indeed, did this duty appear to him, that since for the present he was unable to advance the money, he determined to insure his life for the amount at once. It would be easy, no doubt, hereafter to persuade

the girl—utterly ignorant as she was of business matters—that her investments had turned out more profitably than had been expected, and to induce her to receive the interest of what she had lost without inquiry, but in the meantime she was left with narrow means, which could not be increased without exciting her suspicions. Langton regretted too late that he had laid the state of her finances before her with such particularity, since this had put it out of his power to assist her without her being aware of it. Her remaining capital, after that huge cantel had been advanced to her, to the promise of which he had committed himself, would only realise about 100*l.* a year—to some women, indeed, a sufficiency in itself; to others, who, as Langton had pointed out, could 'club' their means, a moderate competency; but to Hester Darrell, accustomed to twelve-buttoned gloves and a Bond Street dressmaker, a scanty income indeed.

Previous to her residence in Welham

Street, Hester had, under the modest roof of Madame Langlais, lived a very quiet life innocent of all extravagances; but she had had no experience whatever of domestic economy, without which even a woman with twice her income, and compelled to provide for herself, is poor indeed. Considering the paramount importance to most girls of a knowledge of housekeeping—of which it is not too much to say that she who possesses it can make a home out of as scanty materials as a French cook can make a good ragoût, while she who possesses it not will waste a fair income in her attempt to learn it—it is a branch of education monstrously neglected. For the wife of a gentleman who marries upon 400*l.* a year it is not only a more necessary accomplishment than most things taught at Girton, but also—though it is hard to say it—one that more sweetens existence, for I doubt if even the capability of rendering a Greek chorus into English, or solving a problem in

dynamics, can compensate for the reflection that one is running one's husband into debt for fish that is anything but fresh, and for very inferior mutton. Nay, even if she should have no husband—if it be possible for the female mind to face such a catastrophe—it is just as well that a woman should know how to make a slender income stretch to its proper limits, and thereby avoid the necessity for sordid cares.

It is fair to say that the young ladies themselves are not so much to blame for their ignorance in these matters as those who are responsible for their bringing up, and who are much more solicitous about their catching husbands than their keeping them; and it must also be confessed that many mothers of families, sensible and unselfish in all other respects, are often very tenacious of their rights as housekeepers, and disinclined not only to delegate their duties to their daughters, but even to make them acquainted with them; or if sometimes they do suffer them to 'tool the

coach' for a stage or two, they are so disgusted with their bad driving that, forgetting that they were once learners themselves, they impatiently beckon them from the box, and themselves resume the reins again.

With these general reflections upon the incapacity of young housekeepers Philip Langton, it is probable, did not trouble himself, but upon the helpless position of Hester Darrell in particular, to which his own inability to say 'No' had reduced her, he thought much. How strange it seemed to him (though, curiously enough, the idea would never have occurred to himself had the situation been his own), that with so many and such wealthy friends as she possessed, she should be straitened as to means at all. The society in which she moved, many of whom had professed the warmest attachment for her late father, comprised the richest people in England; and a few crumbs from the table of any one of them would have formed an ample

provision for her. To ask for them on her behalf was not, of course, to be thought of; but when these persons came to know to what straits she was reduced, it would surely occur to some of them to show to Hester, in some delicate but material manner, in what affectionate regard they held her father's memory. From his entertainment of which reflections it may be gathered that though Philip Langton might long have lost his own illusions, he still permitted himself to indulge in a dream or two in respect to the conduct of other people.

As he walked sadly home from Mrs. West's, whither he had promised to return on the morrow to discuss ways and means, or, in other words, her future, with Hester, he came upon Lord Buttermere in Hyde Park, enjoying on a bench (to which he beckoned him) the gratuitous pleasures of sun and air.

'See that man,' said his lordship, pointing to an official-looking personage lingering in their vicinity, with a disappointed expression

of countenance, 'that's a vulture. But for me you would have sat down on a chair—I know you would—and he'd have put his beak into you. He's been dogging me for this last half-hour, in hopes there would not be an empty bench; but you see I've done him.'

'But what is the difference between a bench and a chair?' inquired Langton, who had his reasons for humouring this eccentric millionaire.

'The difference, indeed! why all the difference!' replied the peer contemptuously, 'since one you pay for, and the other you don't. Take a seat, sir, and sit wide, and then we shall have it all to ourselves.'

Philip Langton accepted this hospitable invitation in the spirit in which it was offered. He had somewhere read, or heard, that very wealthy persons, notorious for their parsimony, would now and then make proof of it by some exceptional act of magnificent generosity. Why should not this splendid old curmudgeon

have an opportunity afforded to him of thus emphasising his peculiarities, and at the same time of burnishing the wings of an angel? It seemed as if Fate herself approved of this innocent strategy, since the peer's next observation had an immediate reference to the matter in hand.

'Haven't seen you, by-the-bye, since poor Darrell left us. You and I, I suppose, were about his oldest friends.'

Under any other circumstances Langton would hardly have appreciated this association, but as matters were he hastened to cultivate the favourable soil.

'Why, yes,' said Langton. 'If I remember rightly, Lady Buttermere stood godmother to his only daughter, poor Hester.'

He remembered it well, and also the electro-plated silver mug that had been bestowed upon the occasion in question, which had often been a subject of merriment between the Colonel and himself.

'Did she, now? Well, I dare say she did, and I am sure she has no reason to regret it. An excellent fellow was the Colonel—one of the most deservedly popular of men.'

If he was prudent of more material matters, Lord Buttermere was prodigal of gracious epithets, and especially when his friends were dead. As a composer of epitaphs—to be engraved at somebody else's expense—he could not, indeed, have easily found a rival.

'I have just come from Mrs. West's, where his daughter is staying for the present,' continued Langton. 'She reminds me very much of him in many ways. The Colonel left me his executor and in a manner her guardian.'

'Very nice of him, very good of him,' returned his lordship. 'I hope,' he added with a chuckle, 'he left you something else, just to remember him by.'

Philip Langton's brow darkened like a thunder-cloud.

'I am never likely to forget Richard Darrell, my lord, and I think he knew it.'

'Just so, just so,' returned the other with a little nod of acquiescence, 'only a mourning ring is not to be despised, and even a ten-pound note is a sort of thing that always comes in handy. I hope Miss Hester has been left well provided for.'

'I am sorry to say that that is far from being the case, Lord Buttermere.'

'Indeed, indeed,' replied the other in a tone of vexation; 'of course it is not every only daughter who is left an heiress, but you do astonish me. At the same time she has no one to provide for but herself. It is but little that a young girl needs, and what may seem a small income to a man like you, will, in her case, be positive affluence.'

'You are unfortunately quite mistaken, my lord. Your wife's godchild, I give you my honour, has barely sufficient to supply her with the necessaries of life.'

'Pooh, pooh, you mean the luxuries.'

'I have already pledged my word to the literal truth of my assertions.'

'Then all I can say,' said Lord Buttermere, 'is that Darrell has behaved with great imprudence and extravagance. Why, dear me, he had only to insure his life, and consider the premium as part of his necessary expenditure.'

'We were speaking of his daughter, my lord,' interrupted Langton drily, 'who, whatever may have been the shortcomings of our dead friend, can hardly be held responsible for them.'

'Certainly not, certainly not, let us be just before——that is before everything. It is a comfort to reflect that this dear young lady has plenty of friends.'

'I don't know where she could have made them,' observed Langton gravely, 'since she has only been a few months in England.'

'I mean, of course, her father's friends,' explained Lord Buttermere.

'Just so, of whom you and I, as your lordship has just been saying, are the oldest. If she has no claim upon us, she has no claim upon anybody, and for my part I shall help her to the uttermost of my power.'

'Quite right,' observed his lordship with an approving nod. 'A friend should show himself friendly.'

'On the other hand,' continued Langton, 'my power is small, and her knowledge of the fact will make my help distasteful to her; now you are a man in an exceptional position, a sort of small providence, from whom benefits can be derived with thankfulness, but without the sense of obligation, as though they fell from the skies.'

Lord Buttermere's face began to expand and shine; every word of his companion seemed to bring out some expression of graciousness and philanthropy in his ample countenance. It seemed to him that he had at last discovered a fellow-creature who tho-

roughly understood and appreciated his character.

'I trust, indeed, my dear Langton,' he replied with unctuousness, 'that I am not altogether unmindful of the duties of my position. No one can say that I have neglected the talents committed to my trust.'

No one could, as Langton could not help acknowledging to himself, desirous as he was of taking another and larger view. It was certainly not Lord Buttermere's habit to put anything into a napkin, but to realise the best percentage that could be got out of it with safety.

'What you say about this dear young lady,' continued the peer with emotion, 'affects me more than I can express. I have a general objection to indulge myself in acts of abstract benevolence, which are in fact only a form of selfishness; but in this case I really think I may make an exception without any sacrifice of principle. So young, so fair, and also so

well conducted,' added Lord Buttermere with the air of one who excuses himself for a proposed extravagance, 'not to mention her being the daughter of my old friend.'

'I think, my lord, any resolution you may have formed in Miss Darrell's favour scarcely stands in need of an argument,' observed Langton drily. He was getting a little impatient of the other's pompous prolixity, from which, nevertheless, he drew the most hopeful auguries. It was surely impossible, he thought, that all this fuss should be made about any gift that fell short of munificence.

'It is not as if my own conscience was alone concerned in the matter,' observed his lordship loftily. 'I have also to make myself understood by the world, lest what is an exceptional act of benevolence should be construed as a precedent.'

'Why, good heavens! you are not going to tell everybody about it, are you?' exclaimed Langton vehemently. The scornfulness

of his tone was so expressive that it made itself apparent to his own ear, and in doing so reminded him of the part he had undertaken to play. 'It appears to me, at least,' he added in a lower tone, 'that the very essence of the good deed you have in contemplation, my lord, lies in the delicacy and secrecy of its execution.'

'But if I give it to you—I mean the money—I suppose you would let her know who it comes from?' observed Lord Buttermere in alarm.

'Well, I suppose I should,' returned Langton. It was with difficulty that he could restrain himself from an ebullition, and yet there was something in his companion's astounding thickness of skin that tickled his sense of humour; perhaps, too, beneath that rhinoceros hide there was still the soft spot for which he was so diligently searching, and the discovery of which would atone for all.

'Just so,' continued his lordship, in a tone

of great depression; 'and while one is about it one may just as well do it at once and get it over, eh?' He looked like a patient appealing to his surgeon; the hideous character of the coming operation he did not attempt to conceal from himself, but he hoped that the other might counsel delay.

'I think one ought to strike while the iron of a good impulse is hot,' returned Langton decisively. 'At the same time I need hardly remind you that a few words of kindness—a few words of allusion to the relations between yourself and Colonel Darrell—should accompany your munificence, without which, indeed, it would scarcely be made acceptable. Miss Darrell reminds me of her poor father in many ways, but in none more than in her independence of character and delicate sense of obligation. If it was not an impertinence I would even venture to suggest a hope that the arrangement your lordship may propose to yourself will not necessitate the employment

of a third person. Why, gracious heavens! what is this?'

Lord Buttermere had pulled out his pocket-book and carefully extracted from it a neatly-folded bit of paper, which he placed in his companion's hands. It was certainly not a blank cheque, and, in spite of Langton's efforts to discredit his own eyesight, looked uncommonly like a five-pound note.

'There's nothing the matter with it; it's a good one, isn't it?' inquired his lordship with indignation. 'Well, just you give that to the young lady. Why, what are you doing? Great heavens! what *are* you doing?' he exclaimed, in tones of positive agony. 'You must be stark staring mad!'

Philip Langton, with his eyes fixed upon his lordship with immeasurable contempt, was tearing the five-pound note into very small pieces.

'Give it me back, give it me back!' pleaded the peer with frantic entreaty; 'I have known

the fringes of postage-stamp paper patch them up as good as new.'

Langton opened his palm as if in acquiescence with the request, and the summer wind, slight as it was, carried the light fragments in a thousand different directions.

'You will have to make it up to her!' ejaculated Lord Buttermere with querulous passion. 'I will let her know to whom she has to look for making it good.'

'If you dare to speak to her, or to any living being, of the insult you have put this day upon Hester Darrell,' exclaimed the other vehemently, 'I'll treat every note in your pocket-book in the same manner, as sure as my name is Philip Langton. No human being who ever slept upon this bench for want of a bed was so mean a creature in the sight of Heaven, I do believe, as you are, Lord Buttermere.'

With that he strode away, no less at war with himself than with the object of his indig-

nation. A man may wear his own heart upon his sleeve for daws to peck at, if he is fool enough to do so; but to expose that of another to such treatment without leave or licence is an unwarrantable liberty, and something of this sort it seemed to Langton that he had done. To have appealed for help for Hester, when, as he well knew, she never would have done so for herself, and with this humiliating result, was a crime which he felt, if she should ever come to know of it, he would never be pardoned.

The reflections of Lord Buttermere were of a different though hardly more enviable kind. The sense of loss which (we have the poet's word for it) is the most poignant of all senses, wrung his very soul.

'If it had been only one of my own notes,' he murmured, for his lordship was still a banker, and the head of his firm, 'I should only have been a pound or so out of pocket; but as it is there's five golden sovereigns

thrown to the—well, to the Governor and Company of the Bank of England. That fellow Langton must be a madman. Mean, he called me! There are no bounds to the expectations of some people. I do believe if I had given him a ten-pound note for the girl he would have treated it just the same.'

CHAPTER XXI.

AN INVITATION.

To the legal mind nothing, no doubt, can appear more monstrous than that Philip Langton, being in the position of her dead father's executor and her own guardian, should have been persuaded to hand over to Hester Darrell, a girl yet in her teens, so large a proportion of the money which he had in trust for her; on the other hand, some things occasionally seem quite natural to the legal mind which to that of the general public appear prodigious and abnormal enough.

It must be remembered, moreover, that Langton's relation to Hester was not merely that of guardian to ward. He had known her all her life, and regarded her with a devotion

only second to that of her father himself, in whose position he now stood. It was a positive pleasure to him to indulge her, and a proportionate pain (only he had never tried it) to deny her anything she desired. I am inclined to think, indeed, that there is no limit to the folly which a man of Philip Langton's character is capable of committing to oblige a young and beautiful girl, who looks up to him with artless affection as to her only friend and protector. Of business matters, to say truth, he knew very little more than Hester, and found a difficulty in interesting himself in them, which, to nine-tenths of his sex would have been inexplicable, while on money itself he set so small a store as in the opinion of most people would have qualified him for a lunatic asylum. He had a strong sense of legal right which caused him, as we have seen, to propose to himself some immediate means of making good to Hester the loss that she was about to sustain through his own good nature, but, that provision being

effected, the matter was likely to trouble his Serene Executorship but very little. His chief solicitude, indeed, was that it should not trouble Hester, who, had she been aware of the legal aspect of the affair, would certainly never have made a request that placed such a huge personal responsibility upon Langton's shoulders. To her uninstructed mind it seemed as though she was only asking an advance of what was already her own, and in respect to which nobody but herself could be the loser.

On the other hand, it was a great comfort to Langton to know that this was not the case, and that, in reality, she was asking nothing that could hurt herself but only him. It is probable, indeed, that the whole transaction would even have given him pleasure, but for the doubts he had in his own mind as to the necessity of the money being advanced at all. As to the object to which it was to be applied, it was impossible under the circumstances to question the girl with any particularity; the

claim, whatever it was, evidently appealed to her sense of honour rather than to that of right; but in the interview which, as had been agreed on, followed that in which her request was made, Langton did make an effort to assure himself that she was not at least the victim to a fraud.

'When a man dies, my dear Hester, attempts are often made to obtain money upon his account from his friends which would never have been made to himself. I do hope that you are well convinced of the justice of the present demand, and especially that you are not acceding to it upon the bare word of any individual.'

'I have written proofs of it, Mr. Langton,' answered Hester gravely, 'in my dear father's own handwriting.'

Her pale face flushed to her forehead, and her voice trembled as she spoke. Langton felt himself a wretch for having caused her such obvious distress of mind, and, even if her

words and tone had not fully corroborated his previous view of the matter, would have abstained from putting another question to her.

'You shall have the money in a few days,' he answered gently; 'it is unnecessary to say another word about it.'

'If I do not again allude to it, dear Mr. Langton,' she replied, while the tears rushed to her eyes, 'it is not, be sure, because I do not understand the unusual, possibly even the unexampled, trust you have thus placed in my bare word. The gratitude that I feel towards you, you on the other hand can never understand, because you do not know how heavy is the load that your generous delicacy has thus lifted from my heart. There are circumstances which prevent me from treating you in this matter with the frankness and candour that you deserve, but henceforth, and in all things else, I shall come to you for help and counsel, as dear papa bade me do with almost his last breath.'

'I hope so; indeed, I hope so,' was the earnest reply.

'It is not much of a guerdon for your great kindness,' she continued with a smile, 'that I should thus impose upon you the task of adviser to a young and foolish girl.'

'It will, nevertheless,' he answered gravely, 'be a very great pleasure to me, and the sooner I undertake the duties of my position the better. You have had many communications from your father's friends, no doubt. Have any of them suggested a plan for your future life?'

'Many of them have been very kind, most kind,' said Hester warmly. 'It seemed that every one strove to express, at dear papa's funeral, some tender recollection of him.'

'If you refer to the wreaths that were so bountifully bestowed on that occasion,' said Langton drily, 'they are blossoms, my dear girl, I regret to say, of a kind that do not bear much fruit.'

'Still, what could friends do more, or what

more would I have had them do? Even if I had been much poorer than I am, dear Mr. Langton, I should never have dreamt of asking——'

'Of course not, of course not,' interrupted Langton with a guilty recollection of that appeal of his to Lord Buttermere. 'You would no more have thought of asking them to help than they of offering it; one cannot put the case much stronger than that.'

Hester looked up at him a little puzzled, then went on unconscious of the sarcasm. 'The kindness of some of them I shall never forget,' she continued; 'Mrs. West has been a second mother to me.'

'Quite true,' said Langton, with enthusiasm; 'one in a thousand, one in ten thousand.'

'And her girls have been as sisters.'

'That is not to be wondered at—I mean,' observed Langton, correcting himself, 'that they are excellent girls, capital girls.'

'This house has been my home for weeks,' continued Hester with emotion. 'Consider what a guest I have been, bowed down by grief, and of necessity the most cheerless of companions. Yet they have never suffered me to feel that I have worn out my welcome. Nay, more, Mrs. West has even offered that I should remain with her indefinitely, a thing not to be thought of, perhaps, in any case, however tempting the offer might have seemed to me, but now, of course, quite out of the question.'

'You mean that you could not bear your share of even their moderate housekeeping,' observed Langton thoughtfully, and wondering to himself if such an arrangement was within his means, and if so, whether it could be made without her knowledge.

'Of course not. Pray do not suppose, my dear Mr. Langton, that I have not the courage to look my future in the face. It will, I know, be something altogether different from my past.

Since I have been here I have now and then accompanied Grace and Marion in their visits to poor people. I am ashamed to say that it was a new world to me, and I am infinitely obliged to them for my introduction to it. I now know that that is the real world, and that the one in which I have been living is an exceptional state of existence. There are people all around me, to whom the money which is still left to me would seem like opulence; people who, when they are hungry, have not enough even of bread to eat; who, when they are cold, lack clothes and firing; who, when they are sick, have not the means to purchase the most ordinary comforts. Do not pity me, Mr. Langton, for I may honestly say that, save for that other loss (wherein I claim kin with the most miserable), how fortunate by contrast with that of thousands of my fellow-creatures is my own lot, and how little reason I have to repine at it.'

'But, my dear Hester, these poor people—

though indeed you are quite right to pity them —are, after all, in a manner used to it.'

'Do not say that, dear Mr. Langton,' pleaded Hester earnestly. 'Do not do violence to your noble nature by imitating the cuckoo note of the harsh and selfish. Do you think that anything can make a mother used to the sight of her children lacking bread, or in pain, without the means of mitigating it, or pining for the fresh air that she has no means of purchasing for them? Is it not enough that we should turn our ears away from the cry of the poor, without making light of the misery that extorts it?'

Langton gazed at Hester with amazement. He had given her the credit that men usually give to girls they think well of, for tender and charitable thoughts. That she should be grave, sorrowful, and even devout, was under the circumstances to be expected; but the earnestness and enthusiasm she was exhibiting were altogether unlooked for.

She had never seemed to him so gentle and so pure, or, as he expressed it to himself, so like a saint, as she looked in her deep mourning, but he had set it all down to the misery of her own condition, and to the sense of her personal calamity. That she should be taking these larger views of life at a time when her own share of it was being so narrowed astounded him. As he gazed at her with wondering eyes, it struck him for the first time that there was a change in her face, beyond what was to be accounted for by the circumstances of her new position. Could this have been wholly caused by the mere fact of her having visited a few poor folks, as he understood in a vague way it was customary for some young ladies to do? Or was it not, more likely, owing to some experience of another kind, perhaps in connection with the disposal of the sum for which she had appealed to him, and which might have thrown her thoughts out of their usual groove? For the moment it

even struck him that, in her highly wrought and abnormal state of mind, it was not unlikely that she was contemplating a retirement from the world and devoting herself to deeds of charity. Whether such a course was right or not, he felt certain that she was at present in a state of mind very unsuitable for a decision so important.

'You must forgive me, Hester,' he answered gravely, 'if my feelings of duty towards my fellow-creatures are just now a little more restricted than they should be by reason of the more immediate duty to yourself, which, as you have just said, has been imposed upon me by your dead father. In granting you, as you have admitted, so much more than you had any reason to expect, I have not forfeited my authority over you, remember, in other respects. I have no desire to pry into your secrets, I have waived my right to do so in one instance——'

'I know it, I know it,' she interrupted

vehemently, and for that generous abstinence I am your debtor to my life's end. Whatever course it may please you to advise me to take, you will not find me disobedient; it is the least I can do in return for the trust you have placed in me. Do not fear that I shall give you any further trouble.'

'There is a good girl,' replied Langton with a sigh of relief. The observation, as he felt, was short of the occasion, and even slightly ridiculous, but it conveyed his feelings. 'And now, since remaining with Mrs. West seems out of the question, has any alternative since suggested itself to you?'

'I have had an invitation from my aunt Elizabeth,' said Hester slowly.

'What, from Lady Barton?' exclaimed Langton, smiling. 'That goes far indeed to restore the average. If one overrates the good in some persons one underrates it in others. She probably knew, however, that she was making a proposal that would never be accepted.'

'I should be sorry to think that,' said Hester gravely. 'Her note was curt and strange enough, yet I think it was sincere; you shall, however, judge for yourself.' She took from her desk an envelope containing two enclosures, and handed him one of them.

'DEAR NIECE,—I am truly sorry to hear of the calamity that has befallen you. I know nothing, of course, of the state of your affairs. It is probable that among your many friends you will find a home in every way more agreeable to you than Medbury; but if this should not happen to be the case you may count upon me to give you a genuine welcome.

'Yours sincerely,

'ELIZABETH BARTON.'

'Stiff enough, indeed,' was Langton's comment, 'and yet I agree with you that her ladyship means what she says. It is very unfortunate that there should have been so wide a breach between you, and for so long.'

'You are thinking, of course, what dear papa would have wished me to do,' said Hester gently. 'It is very curious, but within a few days of his death he conversed with me upon this very subject: if anything should happen to him, he bade me remember that it was not his wish that I should reject any overture from aunt Elizabeth. It was really almost as if he foresaw——' She turned away her head and finished the sentence with a sigh.

Langton sighed also, but for another reason; it was clear to him that the Colonel had not only 'almost' but quite foreseen what was about to happen, and had made his arrangements accordingly.

'This, of course, leaves you free to act, Hester, in accordance with your own views in the matter,' observed Langton thoughtfully. 'You acknowledged her ladyship's letter, I suppose?'

'Yes; and asked for time to consider her kind offer. I felt I was not just then in a fit

condition to decide upon a matter, to me, so momentous, and also that the disposal of myself was not in my own hands. However wilfully I may seem to have behaved, dear Mr. Langton,' she added with a smile, 'I had still, you see, some instinct of obedience.'

'You do what is right quite naturally, my dear girl,' said Langton gravely, 'just as other people quite naturally do what is wrong. It was immensely to your credit, however, that you took your aunt's letter in such good part. It is not, I must say, a very pressing invitation, and considering not only what it says, but what it avoids saying—though, to be sure, when a topic cannot be handled properly it is better perhaps to avoid it altogether——'

'You are praising me as usual much too much, dear Mr. Langton,' interrupted Hester with a quick flush (for the allusion to her father's estrangement from his kindred was painful to her), 'and this time under especially false pretences. I must tell you, that with my

aunt's note came this letter from my cousin Maria, which, as you will perceive, makes ample amends for any shortcomings on the part of her mother. I have seen her but twice in my life, yet you see she writes to me as if we were old friends as well as relatives.'

'My dear Hester,—The news that has come to-day distresses me beyond expression, and you have never been out of my thoughts since it arrived. I have had such few opportunities of seeing you, and I am myself such an insignificant personage, that it almost seems necessary to recall myself to your remembrance. I am the only relative except my mother, dear Hester, that you now have in the world; do, do let me show to you that it is the same blood that runs in our veins. That you will be welcome under many a roof there is no doubt, but is not this, dear cousin, your natural home?

'We are very quiet at Medbury; here you can indulge your grief to your bruised heart's

content, and will find, believe me, the deepest, truest sympathy. It will be such an excessive comfort to me to have you with us, that I dare to think you may yourself receive some of its overflow. It sounds egotistic and presumptuous enough to say so, but love has made me bold. My mother is writing to you by the same post; if her words sound formal, remember that she has never had the happiness of knowing you, as I have had, and I am quite sure that the wish she expresses to see you is sincere. I cannot expect that for the present you will promise more than to give Medbury and me a trial; but at all events, dear Hester, come to us till you shall have made some arrangements for your future. I could write much more, but refrain from doing so, for I think you know what my heart would say to your heart. With the deepest sympathy,

'I am, your affectionate Cousin,

'MARIA BARTON.'

'That is an excellent girl,' exclaimed Langton warmly; 'no matter what stock she comes from.'

'Then you would advise me, as she says, to "try Medbury?"' inquired Hester, smiling.

'Well, yes,' was the hesitating reply. 'There is one thing, however, that has to be considered. You are placed, my dear girl, though partly by your own act, in a very different position in the world from that which you might have been reasonably expected to occupy.'

'You mean that when Lady Barton wrote to me she thought she was inviting a guest, and not a poor relation.'

The colour rushed into Langton's face. 'You put it with painful plainness, my dear Hester. As your father's friend, and your guardian, it is my duty, remember, to see that you are not exposed to humiliations.'

Hester was touched to her heart's core; she felt that no young knight of old had ever

laid lance in rest for his lady love more loyally than this middle-aged gentleman of Pall Mall was doing for his dead friend's daughter.

'There is no fear of that,' she said softly, taking his hand and pressing it in both of hers. 'There should be no fear of anything for me, since I have a friend like you.'

CHAPTER XXII.

CUTTING HER CABLE.

We live rapidly during great events. A single important experience often teaches us more than we have learned in all our lives before, and sometimes the contrary of what we have learnt. The rude hand of adversity, in particular, will tear a veil from our eyes, which, but for it, they would have worn, perhaps, from the cradle to the grave. The majority of people in what are called 'good circumstances' have a certain unctuous, comfortable way of looking at things, which always gives me pleasure, because it proves to me that they have no real knowledge of misfortune. According to these cheerful philosophers, 'people are really uncommonly kind;' one's friends 'will

do anything for one ;' and their little world of acquaintances seems knit together (and especially to *them*) by irrefragable bonds. Even should any strain take place they flatter themselves that these will prove elastic; a 'solution of continuity' in any one of them—far less the whole lot of them snapping short off together—never enters into their mind. They cannot conceive a state of affairs where the tide of friendship, instead of greeting them with its accustomed music and sparkle, goes right out, leaving them at dead low-water—and never comes back again.

Of such a melancholy fact Hester Darrell had certainly had at present no knowledge, and yet, as Philip Langton had said to himself, there was a change in her not to be accounted for by the mere domestic calamity that had befallen her. Her father's death had, indeed, been something more than an ordinary misfortune of the same nature; it had been a catastrophe, and might naturally enough have

made an impression deep and lasting upon her mind. Such occurrences, however, are after all in the course of nature, and their usual effect is merely to depress, though sometimes, alas! to overwhelm for ever. In Hester's case the blow had fallen with terrific force, and at first had utterly prostrated her; but there was no prostration now. She was looking life in the face almost, as it were, before there was any necessity for it, and with the utmost calmness and resolution.

Langton was not the only one who had observed this, for other loving eyes were watching her closely. Mrs. West, being a woman, regarded her, of course, from another point of view, but she was equally puzzled. The advice, *Cherchez la femme*, has its counterpart with the other sex. When anything inexplicable affects one of them her female friends instinctively look for 'the man.'

Without taking Mrs. West into his confidence with respect to detail, Mr. Langton had

a little private conference with her upon Hester's affairs. She showed much distress and amazement at finding she was left so badly off.

'I am afraid,' she said, with a mixture of pity and indignation that was very characteristic, 'the poor Colonel must have been a much more selfish man than any of us had any idea of.'

'If you knew all—though I do not deny he has been much to blame—I do not think you would say that,' observed Langton gently.

'At all events we have only to do with the living,' returned Mrs. West after a pause. She would have dearly liked, as she afterwards observed, to have heard what the counsel for the defence might have to say, but she respected the other's silence. 'The question is, What is to be done with our dear Hester? I hope she feels that this house is her home as long as she pleases to make it so.'

'She feels everything she ought to feel

with respect to you and yours, Mrs. West; but she has a very independent spirit. Her quiet and resolute way of looking at things, indeed, amazes me.'

'And me,' said Mrs. West significantly. 'You and I are not young people, Mr. Langton, and are therefore aware how differently things turn out to our expectation; but to her, remember, all that has lately happened must seem very strange. Her father has been suddenly taken from her, her fortunes have collapsed; the very thing she was apprehensive about—the being sold to the highest bidder——'

'You do the Colonel wrong, Mrs. West,' interrupted Langton gravely. 'That was never intended.'

'At all events, she was not to be a free agent in a matter,' persisted Mrs. West, 'where all girls such as Hester wish to be free. She has lost at one blow both her hopes and her fears.'

'True; and now that life-long estrange-

ment from her father's family seems suddenly about to be exchanged for intimacy. As you say,' added Langton thoughtfully, 'these things are perhaps sufficient to have made a revolution in any girl's character.'

'Nay, I did not say they were sufficient, Mr. Langton, though they, no doubt, have affected her very seriously.'

'You think, then, there is something more —that something else has happened to her, the facts of which are not before us?'

'I don't know what has happened, but I do think she has some secret of her own—a woman's secret.'

'You mean that she is in love. Good heavens! not with that man Mason, I do hope!'

'No, I have already told you that she does not care for him. That he would have won her if he could, I am persuaded; nor did he lose time in wooing her. He sent his aunt, Mrs. Brabazon, to plead for him—at least, that

is my conviction—and by that means obtained an interview almost before the poor girl's tears for her father's loss were dried; but I again repeat, that in my opinion nothing came of it.'

'He would not have been so precipitate,' observed Langton bitterly, 'if he had known how ill off the poor girl was left.'

'Pardon me, my dear sir, I think you are wrong there. The gentleman in question may be all you think him to be, and even worse; and yet he may be genuinely in love.'

'With himself,' was the curt rejoinder.

'Of course, with himself first; that is the case with many of your sex: if we women can only make sure of the second place in a man's heart, we are generally quite content.'

'How on earth could she have been induced to see him at all?' mused Langton with irritation: his mind was too preoccupied to concern itself with any abstract question.

'I cannot tell, unless it was through his

aunt's representations. I only know that he came, he saw, and did not conquer.'

'Then what is your explanation of the change in Hester's character?'

'I have none to give, but only an hypothesis. I think during the last two months she has seen some one who has found his way to her heart. There was, perhaps, no great likelihood under any circumstances of anything coming of it, but that is a very different thing from there being no possible chance of such an issue. And now, as she says to herself, and sees for herself, there *is* no chance. The reason why she takes adversity so calmly is because all other misfortunes have become subordinate to this one. That is why she says to you, "Do with me as you will. I will go to the Bartons or anywhere else; it is all one to me."'

'But before this happened,' urged Langton, 'I mean before the Colonel's death, Hester seems to have taken up with other things than

those to which she had been accustomed; visiting the poor, for instance.'

'That is because she has been thrown of late so much with my girls. We are not people of fashion, you know. Grace and Marion have always considered themselves of the same clay as other people, and not of egg-shell china. Hester has fallen into their ways; they please her, perhaps I may be allowed to say because she shares with them the same charitable and womanly instincts. I should not wonder if in her new position she pushed them somewhat to extremity. The best actions of us women have more often a personal motive than those of men. This is especially the case with young ladies who become, as Mrs. Brabazon calls them, the Brides of the Church.'

'But surely Hester will never take up with Mrs. Brabazon's tomfooleries,' exclaimed Langton apprehensively.

'Certainly not, she will be genuine in all she does, and never self-conscious or demon-

strative; it is probable that she will be always Hester Darrell, and yet not the same Hester Darrell that you and I know.'

'I can't fancy her changing for the better,' remarked Langton simply.

'You are far too impressionable to be any young lady's guardian, Mr. Langton,' observed Mrs. West with an irrepressible smile. 'Nevertheless I will go so far as to admit that I cannot fancy Hester's changing for the worse.'

However the views of Mr. Langton and Mrs. West might differ—and they did differ—as to the cause of change in Hester, they were at one in their affection for her. She recognised it to the uttermost and was grateful to them from the bottom of her heart; but for the present she was unconscious of the rarity of such friendship. In a very short time—for there is no bad news that flies so quickly as that which is euphoniously termed 'a reverse of fortune'—she learnt the difference, which so many of us living in our fool's paradise

never discover, between fair-weather friends and all-weather friends. The former, in Hester's case, were very numerous. A hundred fine ladies of fashion had kissed her and called her their 'dear girl,' and professed their readiness to be mothers to her; their daughters had made overtures to her of eternal friendship; their sons had flung themselves at her feet and lisped devotion. Yet only two persons out of all this multitude henceforth thought it worth while to recall themselves to her existence, and even these—though it was in fact the cause of their communicating with her at all—were careful to ignore her reverse of fortune.

Mrs. Brabazon wrote to say that she had suddenly resolved to accompany her nephew to the Continent (whither, as Hester knew, he was intending to set out), which would prevent her, she regretted to say, from calling to take leave of her. It was her view, that her dear Digby having, for the present, got safely away from the syren—she knew not how, but prob-

ably more by good luck than good guidance—it behoved her to cut off her own personal communications with her so that, if her nephew should show symptoms of a relapse, the dropped skein would be more difficult for him to pick up. He had shown great imprudence in paying attention to Hester even in her former position, but to renew them under her changed circumstances would be midsummer madness.

A similar apprehension moved the maternal heart of Lady Buttermere. She wrote to say that their plans, as respected Fromsham, whither, in a moment of impulsive imprudence, she had invited Hester for the autumn, had undergone a change; they were all going to Scotland with dear Thirlmere, who had taken a moor there for the season: the pleasure that her dear girls had promised themselves in Hester's companionship must, therefore, be postponed.

Whether Hester saw through these particular subterfuges or not, or whether she recog-

nised the fact that Society had turned its back on her, it was difficult to say. She never alluded to these matters in any way. Her mental attitude, in regard to them, to the few lookers on who thought it worth while to note it, seemed to be one of complete indifference. Perhaps, like the dying girl in the ballad, 'All these things had ceased to be with her desire of life;' that is of the life that she had hitherto lived, and which she had utterly done with.

It is only when we are prosperous that mere annoyances and slight disappointments have power to harm us. To him who has received a mortal wound it is of comparatively small consequence that the rain falls on him, or that the wind visits his cheek too roughly. There was nothing, however, of despair or morbid insensibility in Hester's case; and though it is probable that a sense of duty to her hostess was the motive of her smiles, rather than any gaiety of the heart, she was not only uncomplaining but cheerful. On the very day

of her interview with Mr. Langton she wrote to Lady Barton, proposing, if nothing had happened to change her kind intentions towards her, to come down at once to Medbury; and by return of post received a renewal of her ladyship's invitation. It was couched in terms decidedly warmer than before, nor indeed was there any fault to be found with it, save for its studious avoidance of the name of nurse Arkell. It would unquestionably have been a great comfort to Hester could she have taken that faithful friend with her—dearer to her now than ever from association with her beloved dead—to her new home, but she had not ventured to hope that the invitation would include her.

'Her ladyship will have none of me, you may be sure, Miss Hester,' had been the old woman's own words; and besides, would it not, she reflected, have been an arrangement altogether incompatible with her changed circumstances? She no longer belonged to that

class of young ladies who can go nowhere without their maids.

Still, the hour of parting with nurse Arkell was a very bitter one for Hester; it was like the severance of the last strand that held to the shore her little bark, which henceforth was to traverse the ocean of life alone. Her one comfort was that the old woman, thanks to the Colonel's forethought years ago, was well provided for; indeed, if she had only known the truth (which Hester had carefully concealed from her) almost as well as her young mistress.

Then there was the 'good-bye' to be said to her 'all-weather friends;' a sad duty, but fortunately a short one, that sort of congregation being seldom large.

'We are sorry you are going, my dear; we don't want you to go, and we shall be glad to see you back again whenever you please,' said Mrs. West. A simple formula which, however, unlike most formulas, was dictated by her heart.

The two girls embraced her with sobs and tears.

'You are quite like one of ourselves,' they murmured in her ear.

'That is just what I am not, and shall never be again,' was the thought in poor Hester's mind as she folded each to her bosom.

At her own earnest entreaty she went unaccompanied to the train. From Philip Langton, to whom she had bidden adieu the previous evening, she had concealed the time of her departure, or else, as she was well convinced, he would have been awaiting her at the station to do her the last services in his power.

She had braced up all her energies, and to the outward eye had courage enough and to spare; but in truth there was no margin, and she had elected to make this solitary exodus to save herself from breaking down. It was a wise and prudent resolve, and one to be recommended to all in similar circumstances. The platform of a railway station is no place for the tender emotions of a farewell.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SPORETON JUNCTION.

Shingleton is on the north-east coast, and, like other places in the same locality, not approachable by train direct from town ; that is to say, there is a junction at which the journey has to be broken. It is possible, indeed, for great magnates like Sir Abraham Barton to get a through carriage put on at St. Pancras (which involves a little shunting and some inconvenience in the way of delay to those who have the honour of travelling with them by the same train) ; but the ordinary passenger to Shingleton has to turn out 'bag and baggage' at Sporeton ; of this Hester was made duly aware by Maria. 'It is possible,' she wrote, 'that by using papa's name you can get a through carriage ; but at all

events you will have no difficulties, as we shall send to meet you at the junction.'

That so much trouble should be taken about her distressed Hester, who felt it to be out of place, but as for the through carriage it was not very likely she should have got it even if applied for, since she travelled second class. 'Every one,' it is said, 'travels second class nowadays;' but this is not quite the case. It was once remarked to me by a person of high rank that 'everybody lives in the same fashion, and that there is no difference between the mode of life of rich people and poor people save in the matter of superfluities—more curricles.' Taking everybody in the sense of 'everybody who is anybody,' the observation is a just one. People 'in society' live very much in the same way whether they have a thousand a year or twenty thousand; there is no marked diversity in their dinners, their apparel, or their mode of travel. And thus it happened that Hester Darrell, whose father, as all were now

agreed, must have been as poor as a church mouse, had never travelled second class before.

If it had been third class she would not have been discomfited, for indeed she was far too sensible to care twopence about such things; but somehow it did bring the colour to her cheek when on arriving early on the platform the obsequious guard flung open the door of a first-class carriage for her as a matter of course, and she had to tell him that she was going second class. She blushed, not for shame, but from the sense of the incongruity of her apparel (though of course she was in deep mourning), with the state of her finances.

A young lady of my acquaintance, to whom a similar reverse of fortune had still more suddenly happened, once observed to me (very pathetically, as I thought), 'I am ashamed to say I have nothing but fashionable dresses to wear;' and this was literally poor Hester's case. There was no diminution in the guard's politeness when informed of the state of affairs.

Where they get it from I don't know, whether from the ozone they imbibe in travelling rapidly through the air, or from the electricity they acquire through turning so many metal door handles, but English railway guards (I say English, for foreign railway officials can be as offensive as anybody else, and more so) are the politest class of people in the world. I sometimes wish that our Government officials were all compelled to serve at least one year as guards to trains, that they might gain the rudiments of politeness.

'Here is a carriage, miss,' he said with a low bow, 'where I will do my best to see that you are not disturbed.'

And he kept his word so faithfully that she had the compartment to herself all the way to Sporeton Junction, a favour for which she was truly grateful. Of course it was morally very wrong and, from an economical point of view, madness, in Hester, to give that guard a florin when they parted, but it is a system which

certainly works admirably, and which I fervently hope will last my time. To be by herself and free to think her own thoughts was just then worth many florins to Hester.

They were not sad, or at all events not morbid thoughts. The fresh air and the new scenes through which she was so smoothly hurried were like a tonic to her. Every hamlet, every farm by the wayside, had an attraction for her which hitherto such things had never had; she saw in each a microcosm—a world within its nutshell as complete and not much smaller than that in which she had been accustomed to move, and to regard as the universe. The people in these out-of-the-way dwellings, with their humble surroundings, lived a life as real and probably much more useful than that to which she had been accustomed; they were as dear to one another (Hester might well have been excused for putting that reflection even a little more strongly) and as important in the eyes of Him who made them. It might very well

be possible, notwithstanding superficial appearances to the contrary, that she might be leaving her world for a better one. Otherwise, thought she, with an involuntary shudder, her case was bad indeed.

She had gone through much of late that none of her friends guessed at, nor were likely, thank Heaven, to guess, for their knowledge of it would have been a humiliation to her. The experience of a lifetime had been crowded for her into the last few days, and it had been bitter as gall. Poverty, nay, almost dependence, had become welcome to her by contrast with it. It was only the strong instinct of youth and health that prevented even death itself from seeming preferable. Of her old mode of life with all its splendour and luxuries she was unfeignedly glad to have got rid. Philip Langton and the Wests had pitied her not without cause; but though she was far more deserving of pity than they had any idea of, they were wrong as to the cause. She regretted her separation

from them with all her heart, but that circumstances had cut her off from the sphere in which she had moved with them she did not regret. It had become hateful to her. It was with a shudder that she recognised the fact that her father had always lived in it, and indeed had known no other. Her 'dear young papa!' It was but a few weeks ago that she had lost him, but it seemed an age; she had not forgotten him—oh no—but his memory was not the thing it had been: it was a living memory still, but it had suffered change; it had lost something of reverence. It was as though she had been taken to some unwelcome spectacle, to which she would fain have closed her eyes, and had had them forcibly opened to it.

Such revelations do not commonly take place, save upon the death-bed, when all things appear in their true light, save the unfathomable mystery on the brink of which we stand.

It is curious how deep thought swallows

time; though she had omitted to bring a book with her, Hester felt no *ennui* throughout her journey. Presently, her mind, weary of the past, strove to prefigure her future life—an imaginative task indeed. Fortunate, in truth, it is for all of us that the attempt is beyond our powers; if Hester Darrell could have foreseen what fate had in store for her—nay, could she but have snatched a glimpse but a few months hence of one day's doings—existence would have been insupportable to her.

Suddenly, as the train slackened for the twentieth time or so, the words rang out for which she had been told to listen: 'Sporeton Junction, change for Shingleton.' Even then she could not shake herself quite free of dreamland; her thoughts reverted in a flash (not for the first time) to the last occasion on which she had stepped out of a railway carriage, and to him who had been her temporary companion—the invalided young soldier, who had whiled away for her the hours so pleasantly

when she would otherwise have been so feverishly impatient to meet her father, and who had looked after her luggage, and tried to learn her name, in vain, at Charing Cross. Her impression of him had not been very deep perhaps, but it had been lasting. Again and again, at balls and similar festivities in town, she had looked round her in the vague hope of seeing that pleasant face once more, which had never found a rival. All others, to her mind, had fallen short of it in gentleness and honesty, though many had excelled it in mere good looks. She was not the sort of young woman who falls in love at first sight, even with a young gentleman who has been wounded in battle, because he has shown her a little conventional civility; but though she had often thought of him, she had never mentioned the fact of her having met him to any one, which (though she did not know it herself) was significant. I again repeat that she was not in love with him; the pain with which she had

listened to her father's statement of his position, and of the matrimonial destinies that were expected of her, was not increased by her recollection of this interesting young stranger. She was quite aware that in all probability she would never see him a second time, but this very fact had permitted her to make of him a sort of ideal of what a man should be, to indulge herself in innocent and tender fancies which would have been otherwise reprehensible.

'This is your junction; here you change, miss,' said the faithful guard, appearing at the window.

Hester stepped on to the platform and looked about her, remembering what Maria had said of some one coming to meet her. There was some one, hat in hand, within a few feet of her, the very man upon whom her thoughts had been engaged one minute ago: her whilom fellow-passenger by the tidal train!

'So I have found you at last, Miss Darrell?' were his first eager words.

She felt that she was blushing deeply, as, indeed, well she might, had his speech conveyed the meaning which for the moment she put upon it. As though conscious of its having been misconstrued he went on to explain himself with precipitation.

'My name is Drake, Captain Drake. I am a friend and near neighbour of Lady Barton, who enjoined upon me, as I was returning from town to-day, to act as your convoy; but somehow I had the ill-luck to miss you at St. Pancras—a misfortune far greater than I could have imagined since——'

She stopped him with a smile, but in a tone that was earnest and significant enough.

'The reason of your failing to find me is easily explained, Captain Drake; I am travelling second class.' She would fain have added, 'My fortunes have changed since you saw me last,' but the insignificance of the occasion

forbad it. Upon such a little peg it was difficult to hang so important a piece of information; moreover, how could it concern this almost utter stranger to know it?

He pointed to the branch line, where their train was already standing, and murmured something as she thought in relation to it. His words, at all events, were commonplace enough, and contained not the least allusion to the matter in her mind, and yet there was something so sympathetic and tender in his manner as to at once convince her that he knew all that had happened to her, and that it did concern him very much. He himself seemed to think that some explanation was needed, for after a moment's hesitation he added, 'Perhaps I should confess, Miss Darrell, that your affairs have formed a topic of great interest to your friends at Medbury of late, and that I have been taken into their confidence, though without knowing how nearly—that is to say how personally—I mean'—here he stam-

mered very much indeed—'without, of course, my being aware that I myself had ever had the privilege of meeting the object of so much solicitude.'

'You are very intimate, then, with the Bartons?' answered Hester, glad as any bird from the net to escape from so personal a topic.

The colour rose high in the young man's cheek as he replied, 'Oh yes, we are very near neighbours and good friends. This way, if you please, Miss Darrell; we are fortunate in finding a carriage that is not crowded; our little train is generally full on market-days.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MAP OF THE COUNTRY.

A RAILWAY carriage is not commonly described as 'not crowded' when it contains no one save the speaker and the person he addresses; but it would have been a little too much audacity, perhaps, if the young man had congratulated himself upon getting one quite empty, which was the case with the compartment in which Captain Drake and Hester Darrell now found themselves. One cannot always say to a young lady (though one always thinks it), 'How lucky we are to be alone together!'

However lucky it might have been in the present case, the circumstance was not without its embarrassment for both parties. Francis Drake knew that he had already permitted

himself to imply more than he intended, and much more than he ought, and yet felt it highly probable that opportunity and contiguity might, in spite of himself, lead him still nearer to what would be to him a very perilous position. Hester, too, was conscious that the heretofore harmless thoughts that had strayed involuntarily in this young man's direction would henceforth have danger in them, though, indeed, as she bitterly reminded herself, the danger would be all on one side. Whatever dreams she might have indulged in with respect to her companion a few months ago had now been shattered by that 'shock of chance,' the change in her worldly fortunes.

'You know Medbury well, of course,' said she, 'since you tell me you live so near it. Is it really so fine a place as it is described to be?'

'A few months ago,' he answered modestly, 'would have prevented my praising it, for it

was then my home. Since then it has passed into the hands of your relatives, the Bartons, through circumstances, as the phrase goes, over which we had no control.'

'I beg your pardon,' murmured Hester in distressful tones. 'I had heard, indeed, that it had been purchased from those who had possessed it for many generations; but I did not know——'

'How should you?' interrupted her companion gently; 'and if you had known, what have we to complain of? It is not an exceptional trouble to lose house and land. Others, far less able to bear reverses than I, at least, are often far greater sufferers. You yourself, Miss Darrell, as I understand, to my deep sorrow, are in a similar plight; and, besides'—here he glanced at her black dress—'you have had a far deeper loss than that of fortune; whereas my father, though cast down in spirit, for the old walls of Medbury comprised almost the whole world for him, is, thank Heaven,

still alive. It is curious,' he went on with tender gravity, while Hester remained silent, from the fear that speech would bring down the avalanche of her tears, 'that since we last met both of us should have received an ill-turn at the hands of fortune. In my case, indeed—I think I told you as much, for I got quite confidential with you, you remember'—here he smiled—'though you would not vouchsafe me so much as your name and address, I was even at that time aware that matters were not flourishing with us; but I had no idea that I was coming home to find my poor father on the brink of ruin. However, he was spared the spectacle of the old place being knocked down by the auctioneer's hammer. Father Abraham bought it—I beg ten thousand pardons, I had forgotten; I mean Sir Abraham.'

'Yes?' said Hester, with a smile half of amusement half of encouragement.

'Well, Sir Abraham bought the castle, stock, lock, and barrel, just as it stood, family

pictures and all, and to my mind behaved very handsomely in the matter.'

'That's why you call him Abraham, I suppose,' said Hester slyly, 'because Mr. Abraham is made to do the same thing in "The School for Scandal."'

'To be sure; I had forgotten that. Well, no; the fact is, the people about here do call him Father Abraham, and one so easily picks up a bad habit.'

'I don't know whether I ought to ask it of you,' said Hester hesitatingly. 'I mean whether it is not bad taste to make inquiries about one's own connections from one who is himself almost a stranger.'

'That is unkind, Miss Darrell,' put in the young man reproachfully. 'I am sure I do not feel as if we were almost—or anything at all approaching to—strangers; even the common misfortune that it seems has happened to us should surely be some bond between us.'

'I did not mean to be unkind, as you call

it, Captain Drake,' returned Hester, blushing, 'and I don't think I am; indeed, I fear it is hardly right to be thus speaking confidentially to you at all upon so short an acquaintance. But though I feel it is most kind of Sir Abraham to permit my aunt to invite me to Medbury, the fact is I am utterly ignorant of what sort of a man he is; I have never set eyes upon him nor even upon my aunt herself, and I should like to know——'

'The map of the country,' interrupted her companion. 'What is more natural than such a desire?'

'It is not at least an impertinent curiosity,' faltered Hester, 'but my doubt is whether I ought to ask you to gratify it.'

'Why not? Who could be better qualified than one who is a common friend to both parties? Well, Sir Abraham is a man of the City, in which he made an immense fortune; and out of which I believe, but for her ladyship, he would never have set his foot. She is

ambitious and compelled him to stand for Shingleton, and when he became its member persuaded him that it was his duty to purchase Medbury. I am sorry to say he does not appreciate it so much as its late proprietor. I think he would have preferred a spick and span new residence, built under his own supervision, with all the latest improvements. Still, since he went in for antiquity, he did it thoroughly; he bought the castle, as I have said, just as it stood, pictures and all, and is as jealous for its reputation as my poor father himself. All things considered, the two old gentlemen get on very well together, the only ground for dissatisfaction Sir Abraham has found with his purchase being that the family ghost (which you remember I told you we possessed) is said to no longer walk in the great corridor. It is a regular appendage to the establishment, and, he contends, should have been conveyed over to him with the other fixtures, or rather movables. By contrast with the lavish open-

handedness of the Drakes, to which, assisted by some unfortunate speculations of his own, entered into to retrieve the family fortunes, my poor father owes his ruin, Sir Abraham appears to our neighbours to be somewhat close-fisted; but this is not really the case; it is only that he is a practical man and likes his money's worth, and as for ourselves we could hardly have fallen into better hands. He is neither emotional nor sympathetic, nor anything of that kind, but there are many worse people in the world than Sir Abraham Barton. Do I make myself intelligible as dragoman?'

'I beg you will not compare yourself with a *valet de place*,' said Hester, smiling. 'It seems to me you have missed your mission and ought to be at the head of the Intelligence Department. And now, for your candour makes me bold, will you paint for me my aunt, Lady Barton?'

'Ah, there you ask something that will test my powers indeed,' returned her companion

gravely. 'Well, Lady Barton is a very fine woman.'

'Is not that rather like saying of one of your own sex, into whose character some one is inquiring, that he is very tall?' observed Hester, smiling.

'Not precisely, I think; the phrase, "a fine woman," to my mind, goes far beyond that. To begin with, a lady of that description has always her willing slaves, which renders her masterful. Not that Lady Barton could ever have required slaves to give her that attribute; she was born with it. In saying that, you will understand, of course, that I am saying nothing against her.'

'Of course not; the picture I had made of her in my mind is so far at one with that you have drawn for me.'

'If I go on, you must understand that my portrait of your aunt may be very far from life-like; a man can paint a man, but rarely a woman, and least of all one who is never

demonstrative, which is the case with Lady Barton. Her feelings are very much under control; I am far from suggesting that she is what is called a hard woman; she strikes me as having less of hardness than her husband (of whom I have not spoken, I hope, unfavourably), but she is more reticent. I have sometimes thought, notwithstanding all her apparent prosperity and her evident satisfaction in it, that she has some secret sorrow.'

'Poor soul, poor soul!' sighed Hester involuntarily.

'If it be so, Miss Darrell, I am sure that it will, in your eyes, be an ample excuse for her if—if—I scarcely know how to express it —but her manner has some stiffness. In your case it is impossible but that she will unbend when she comes to know you; but just at first you will think her cold. She does not wear her heart upon her sleeve; but you will find your way to it.'

'Your knowledge of character may be

great, but I doubt its intuition,' said Hester, laughing; 'and as I did not ask you to read mine, Captain Drake'—she broke off suddenly, attracted by an object in the landscape which came opportunely into view. 'What a noble house that is under the hill yonder!'

'That *is* Medbury—your future home, as I hope you mean to make it.'

To this friendly aspiration—expressed, too, in tones so genuine that it certainly deserved some acknowledgment — Hester answered nothing; the singular beauty of the scene before her, though combined, no doubt, with the possible associations that it might one day possess for herself, held her spellbound. With two exceptions—one of which will occur to every home-traveller, while the other is the hereditary home of the Howards—there is no mansion in England which, from the railway, has so picturesque an appearance as Medbury Castle. Other fine residences, while enhancing

the beauties of nature, fill, after all, only a secondary place in the landscape, while Medbury dominates it. As the train sweeps round the curve that leads to Shingleton and the sea, the Castle suddenly 'leaps up' (as it does in Mrs. Browning's ballad), and though forming only the background of the picture presented to the traveller's eye, demands his undivided admiration. The noble pile is of vast extent, and towers over the stately trees that guard it on the east and west; behind it rises a cliff, in autumn (which was the season at present) green with foliage, and only showing here and there the glint of the chalk; but to the south, whence the travellers were approaching it, it unveils all its beauties; its stately terraces, beneath which lies the sleepy moat, preserved from stagnancy by a thread of running stream, its smooth and shaded lawns, and its park studded with clumps of oak, as old as the walls themselves, illustrate to perfection the poet's line, 'a haunt of ancient peace.'

'I have never seen anything so beautiful,' murmured Hester; 'it is like a new sense of enjoyment to behold it.'

'True,' replied the Captain, pleased by her evident admiration; 'and yet to my father it offers the saddest spectacle, because it is his home no longer. For my part I confess I do not share his feelings; the place, to my mind, is too huge to admit of a merely personal association. It seems to me —though perhaps I should not say so if we had not lost it—that it ought to be public property.'

'I quite understand what you mean,' said Hester, smiling, 'though the sentiment sounds socialistic.'

'Yes; I don't think Sir Abraham would sympathise with it—but here we are at our journey's end.'

With one more turn to skirt the bank of a little river, the train ran into the station.

On the platform, scanning with eager eyes

the foremost carriages, which happened to be first-class ones, stood Maria. The blank disappointment, and even pain, in her face on not finding in them her she sought touched Hester to the core.

'I am here, dear!' she exclaimed from the window.

'Oh, Hester, I am so glad!' cried the girl, running up to the carriage-door; 'I thought both you and Captain Drake had missed the train.'

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ARRIVAL.

WITH every intention to be kind and sympathetic, there is, nevertheless, always a certain reserve in the manner of one who visits a friend who has lately suffered from some domestic loss; the 'suit of woe' affects him, and even somewhat repels him in spite of himself. It is something not in common with them, and invests its wearer with unaccustomed awe. The mourner, in short, who has recovered from his blow, or at all events has become inured to his calamity, is generally much the more demonstrative and genial of the two. It was so, at all events, in the present case. Hester held out her hand frankly to her companion, and thanked him for his care of her

quite naturally, whereas he seemed to bid adieu to her with some embarrassment; and Maria, after her first greeting, relapsed into silence, or broke it with an effort she strove in vain to conceal. Nothing, however, could be more affectionate than her manner, as she sat side by side with her guest in the carriage that was bearing them swiftly to their destination. Her hand was locked in Hester's, which she patted ever and anon in sign of loving welcome; but though she had had so much to say to her a while ago, nor had been puzzled as to what she should say first, words now failed her. It was Hester who was the one to speak.

'It was very kind of you, dear Maria,' she cried, 'to bespeak a convoy for me in Captain Drake. And was it not singular?—he turned out to be an old acquaintance.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes; not that I ever knew so much of him as his name, but, as it turned out, we had been fellow-travellers before, when I returned

from France in the spring. It was most fortunate, for he has made me quite *au courant* with matters at Medbury, and let me into all your secrets.'

'Has he?' returned Maria, blushing to her forehead.

'Oh yes, about the skeleton in your house—don't be alarmed lest he should have been indiscreet—I mean the ghost. Of course it was unnecessary for him to speak of yourself, whom I already knew; but he seems very intimate with you all.'

'Yes, very; though we have known him for a comparatively little while; he is so close a neighbour, you see. Sir Reginald, his father, and papa have had business relations together. He told you, no doubt, that he used to live at the Castle.'

'Yes; and where does he live now? I saw no house as we came along that seemed to be in your immediate neighbourhood.'

'Sir Reginald lives in what used to be the

steward's house—a mere cottage in the grounds. It is very sad to my mind, but it was his own stipulation; he could not prevail upon himself completely to quit the old place.'

'Poor fellow, how I pity him! Now, if I had been in his position——' Here the carriage suddenly stopped.

An old gentleman, riding upon a stout grey pony, suddenly made his appearance at the open window. He had a white beard and moustache, and a handsome ruddy face. 'So you have brought your guest, Miss Maria,' he said, taking his low-crowned hat off with great politeness, and speaking very gently. 'I hope she will find Medbury to her liking,' he added, turning to Hester with a smile.

'Indeed, I cannot imagine any one finding it otherwise,' returned Hester. 'It seems to me one of the loveliest spots on the earth's surface, and I am deeply obliged to you, Sir Abraham——'

'It is not papa, it is Sir Reginald,' put in Maria quickly.

'Yes, unhappily, it is Sir Reginald,' sighed the old man. 'There has been a time, Miss Darrell, when Sir Reginald would very gladly have welcomed you to Medbury, but that is no longer in his power. Francis has returned safe and sound, I hope?' Here he turned once more to Maria.

'Oh yes, we have just parted from him,' she replied; 'he had business in the town, he said, or we should have brought him home.'

'In my young days, it would have been very pressing business that would have kept me out of such company,' said the old gentleman gallantly. 'However, I must not myself be "so superfluous" as to detain you. *Au revoir*, ladies.'

'Dear me, what a shocking mistake I have made!' said Hester. 'Why did you not introduce us?'

'There was no time for it, my dear,' said

Maria, smiling. 'But, indeed, you need not distress yourself. I believe it gave the dear old gentleman genuine pleasure to be taken for that which he so long has been, and which he so thoroughly looks—the master of Medbury. For my part, I always feel like an interloper in Sir Reginald's dominions.'

'That is because you are a new comer,' remarked Hester; 'it will not always be so.'

'Perhaps not,' returned Maria, with an earnestness altogether disproportionate to her words. Then, with a troubled sigh, she added to herself, 'I hope not.'

Silence reigned as they passed through the great gates already set wide for their reception, and up the grand old avenue. Maria seemed deep in thought, and Hester was fully occupied in admiring the ancient trees on either side, which had seen so many seasons come and go;

> Old summers when the monk was fat,
> And issuing shorn and sleek,
> Would twist his girdle tight, and pat
> The girls upon the cheek.

It was some time before they reached the quaint old bridge, which now spanned the moat in place of the drawbridge, some parts of the machinery of which, half-hidden by ivy, were still visible. They then entered a huge courtyard, where a wizened old man in grey was engaged with a spud in eliminating weeds from the gravel.

'That is so like papa, not even to look up as we go by,' observed Maria with a half laugh; 'he thinks that we are merely callers, and he hates callers. Did you ever see such a costume, my dear Hester? One might almost mistake him for the gardener!'

As a matter of fact, Hester had not almost, but quite, mistaken him for the gardener, and not the head gardener either. Under no circumstances—unless, perhaps, he had been attired in complete armour—would Sir Abraham Barton have been easily taken for a knight, but in the suit of dittos in which it was his humour to work in his own grounds, such re-

cognition was an impossibility. It was fortunately unnecessary for Hester to combat, at the expense of truth, the view Maria had thus expressed of her father's appearance, for the next moment the carriage stopped under the ample porch.

A footman ran down the steps to open the door, while a butler of great dignity waited on the summit, with a look of benevolent patronage that would not have misbecome a bishop. The contrast between the splendour of these retainers and the modest mien and appearance of their young mistress struck Hester very forcibly. Sir Abraham himself was not less in accord with them, though the disparity was of another kind. In his case there was doubtless a contempt for display; in his daughter there was an utter indifference to it, and yet not the indifference born of custom; she seemed, as it were, to endure it with a silent protest. There was one member of the family, however, as it struck their guest the next moment, who could

thoroughly appreciate all the surroundings and appliances of grandeur, or at all events to whom they seemed admirably appropriate.

On the threshold of the entrance hall which, as is often the case with Elizabethan houses, was furnished and used as a sitting-room, stood Lady Barton, a tall and very handsome woman of queenly aspect. In complexion she was dark as her daughter, but there all likeness between them ended. Her eyes were large and lustrous, but had little softness; her hair was still plentiful, but only just tinged with grey; her voice was gentle, but to the observant ear too studiously so—it suggested an instrument of compass, and which possessed higher notes.

'Welcome to Medbury, Niece Hester,' were her first words to her young guest, a gracious speech enough though destitute of warmth. She held out one hand as she uttered it, but offered no closer embrace to her sister's child.

Hester murmured her thanks rather than

spoke them; this reception had chilled her, and moreover she was embarrassed by the fixed regard of her hostess, who, holding her at arm's length, seemed to scan her every feature with particularity. Then presently she muttered to herself 'the very image,' and quietly dropping the girl's hand, moved without a word of apology to the fireplace, where she stood gazing at the smouldering logs (for, though autumn, it was warm, and the fire was low) with her back towards her visitor and apparently unconscious of her presence.

'Let me show you to your room, my dear Hester,' whispered Maria hastily; 'you will be glad to change your dress after your long journey, and it is less than an hour to dinner time.'

The oak staircase which ran double winged from the hall, of breadth so great that the proverbial coach and four could with ease have been driven up it, was also of great height, yet when they reached its summit, Hester, looking

down, beheld the mistress of the house still gazing thoughtfully into the wood fire, as though its ashes held the embers of her youth.

'You must not be troubled at mamma's manner, Hester,' said Maria, following the direction of her cousin's eyes; 'she means nothing but kindness to you I am sure, but she is often more or less *distrait*, and I fancy that the sight of you has awakened some long-sleeping memory, some likeness in you perhaps to your poor mother.'

Hester moved her head as if in assent; it was not worth while to discuss the matter, and moreover the topic would have been an embarrassing one; but as a matter of fact Hester had inherited her features from her father, and not from her mother.

The apartments allotted to Hester were charming ones—a bedroom overlooking the park, and a little sitting-room adjacent which commanded a reach of the river, with a glimpse, through the trees, of old-fashioned Shingleton

and the sea. The furniture was plentiful but very old-fashioned, and included some specimens of tapestry. In one of them a young person with very dishevelled hair and a melancholy expression of countenance was playing upon some stringed instrument, amid the ruins of a palatial building, to an audience of domestic animals.

'Orpheus, I conclude,' said Hester, indicating this work of art with her finger.

'Not at all,' returned Maria, laughing; 'that is supposed to be the family ghost; she discourses melancholy music about the house whenever it is about to change proprietors. These fragments represent metaphorically the ruins of Medbury.'

'But the animals? They surely do not prefigure its having gone to the dogs?' inquired Hester roguishly.

'Hush! you must not talk like that; it is really quite a sacred subject with some people. It is said that Sir Reginald was greatly encouraged from the circumstance that when he

sold the place the ghost made no sign. If it had gone for ever from him he felt certain that she would have raised the coronach of his race, and from her silence he gathered hope that the place will again revert to him.'

'The poor old gentleman must be easily comforted,' said Hester; 'I am not very credulous about such matters myself, but still I hope the ghost will not put my strength of mind to the test by haunting me. I am quite content with its counterfeit presentment.'

'You need not be at all afraid, my dear,' said Maria cheerfully, 'it never appears to anybody, and only makes its presence known by its dirge to the rightful heir of Medbury. It is said that Sir Reginald, who was travelling in the East when his father died, received notice by this means of the event many days before he heard it through the usual channels.'

The sound of the dressing-gong cut short further details respecting this family spectre, in which Hester did not, I am afraid, feel all the

interest proper to the situation. I have noticed that Art and Ghosts have no great influence over those whose worldly outlook is depressing or uncertain, and Hester was more concerned with the flesh and blood surroundings, upon whose character her future might more or less depend, than with any spiritual manifestations. Maria called for her on her way down to show her the way to the drawing-room, where the master of the house was standing in Britannic fashion with his back to the fire. In evening costume, he no longer of course resembled a gardener, yet no one would have taken him for what he was. Her Majesty had made Sir Abraham Barton a Knight, the poor Colonel had been wont to say, but if she had made him a gentleman, such a miracle would have proved the divine right of kings. He certainly did not look like a gentleman. He was a little old man, very thin and wiry, with a scant crop of iron-grey hair, a lined and wizened face, and an expression keen and harsh as that of a ferret. He dropped

one coat tail as Hester came up, and held out two thin fingers like a pickle fork. He said nothing, and Hester timidly murmured, 'How are you, Sir Abraham?'

'How are you, miss?' he answered simply, and then renewed his former position.

It was not a gracious welcome, but then, on the other hand, it was not a grudging one; his manner had no personal antagonism in it, but was merely the outward and visible sign of the absence of grace of any kind. Maria, thinking perhaps that a worse impression might have been produced on her friend than was the case, looked supremely miserable for a moment or two, till Hester, to relieve her embarrassment, fell to praising the view from the windows, the shutters of which were still unclosed. Then, gathering courage and feeling that she ought to address her host, if only to give him an opportunity to say something, she expressed her admiration of the room itself, which indeed was magnificent.

'It's a fine enough room, miss,' was the encouraging reply, 'and so it ought to be, considering what it cost me.'

His wrinkled brow became more corrugated as he spoke, as though the items of the amount were still before him, and he threw up his eyes with a gesture of discontent. On the carved and gilded ceiling all the gods of Olympus were depicted over their nectar and ambrosia, which fortunately diverted his mind from his own lavish expenditure to the fact that it was past dinner time. He pulled out his great gold watch and exclaimed impatiently, 'Why don't the fellow beat that gong?'

'Sir Reginald and his son have not arrived, papa,' said Maria gently.

'Then we'll sit down without 'em,' answered the Knight impatiently. 'They should know our hour by this time, for they have dined often enough with us; indeed I don't know why they should keep a cook at all. Ring the bell, Maria.'

Before this behest could be obeyed, Lady Barton entered the room; with a Juno-like demeanour, she had also the eyes of Argus, and while appearing to patronise universal nature, took in the particulars of a situation at a glance.

'Our guests are just arrived,' she said; 'they are generally like clock-work.'

'Their mainspring has broken for once then,' muttered Sir Abraham, but her ladyship took no notice of the remark. She never wasted her strength, as women are so apt to, in any 'affair of outposts,' but reserved it for pitched battles. For these, however, occasion now seldom offered; victory had sat too often on her banners to encourage her husband to revolt. In her presence he only exhibited his independence to others.

'You did not tell me Sir Reginald and his son were coming,' said Hester to her friend reproachfully. The tone in which she spoke was almost a whisper, yet Lady Barton heard it.

'Do not think we have any party,' she observed gently; 'we do not consider the Drakes company; they live in our own grounds and we are naturally very intimate.'

At this moment the guests were announced. Sir Abraham dropped both his coat tails and ambled towards the door, his lips nervously moving as if he were endeavouring to form a sentence, his ferret eyes blinking as though he had only just been let out of his bag. These were storm signals, forerunners of a rudeness, but it was foreseen and averted.

'Sir Reginald, you have nearly lost your character with my husband for punctuality,' said Lady Barton, smiling.

'And deservedly so,' replied the Baronet penitently, 'we are nearly ten minutes late. Sir Abraham must forgive us, however, since the delay arose from our interest in the affairs of his constituency. We waited in Shingleton longer than we should have done to see the old *Javelin* come in with her last cargo of

holiday makers for the season. It is high time that she should cease running, for she is getting very old and cranky. In the spring I hope the town will have a new steamer.'

'Then I hope the town will buy it,' observed Sir Abraham, 'and not come to me for a subscription, who never go on the sea by any chance.'

'One can't write oneself M.P. for Shingleton without also signing a cheque or two, my dear sir,' said Sir Reginald drily.

'Your position, Sir Abraham,' observed the Captain, 'is like that of the First Lord of the Admiralty in the burlesque: though you may not appreciate life on the ocean wave yourself you are the ruler of the Shingleton Navee, and it cannot be increased without your fiat.'

'If they depend on me they must be content with what they have,' said the Knight with irritation; 'it's all very well for you two

gentlemen to suggest a new steamer who have not got to pay for it.'

'I am afraid you are getting a little deaf, Sir Abraham,' interposed her ladyship with great distinctness. 'Dinner has been announced; perhaps you will give your arm to Hester.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

A LITTLE DINNER-PARTY.

It was a strange dinner-party, composed, as even the latest guest could not fail to observe, of very different if not discordant materials, bound together surely by some bond at which at present she could not guess, or its repetition —for it took place night after night—would have been impossible. The character of Lady Barton was not easily read. On a first acquaintance, at all events, little could be learnt from it, except that, as Captain Drake had observed, she was a very 'masterful' woman. She was not only, however, the prevailing genius of the feast, with power to quell disturbances and to put her foot down, as we have seen, upon the least symptoms of an unpleasantry, but she

had the sagacity to perceive them while they were as yet in the air. She had not, indeed, the gift of putting everybody about her at their ease; nor, so far as my experience goes, was there ever (unless the elements they had to deal with were themselves 'kindly mixed') either man or woman who had, but she diffused about her a certain serene if stately atmosphere, very favourable to peace and quietness. There are some women of a similar type who content themselves with exercising a sort of imperial sway over their guests; who sit alone above the thunder (of conversation) like the gods, and take very little notice of tumults or even of catastrophes. Lady Barton, on the contrary, had an eye and an ear for everything, and far from waiting till a knot should occur of sufficient magnitude to justify her intervention, she would stretch forth a majestic hand and smooth matters at the outset before a knot could be formed at all. While making it her business to see that

her guests pulled well together, she held, like a skillful charioteer, her reins in separate fingers, so that particular appeal, when appeal seemed necessary, could be made to each; while, when it was necessary to use the whip (which was the case with one only of the team), the long, lithe lash seemed to light, like an angler's fly, exactly on the right spot, or, at all events, on a tender one.

Sir Abraham was very difficult to drive, nor was it an easy task even to lead him. Like most self-made men he was very obstinate and self-opinionated, while he strove to make up for a secret sense of inferiority by self-assertion. He was not, like Lord Buttermere, a miser, but having by great toil and perseverance (as well, of course, as good luck) amassed an immense fortune, he attached an importance to it which roused the contempt of those who took a juster view of its value. He prided himself above everything on being practical, which was so far fortunate for his self-esteem,

for of matters that were not practical Sir Abraham knew absolutely nothing. His politics were practical, and consisted in retaining his seat for Shingleton on the cheapest possible terms; his religion was practical, and comprised the payment of the sittings that his family used in church, with subscriptions to benevolent institutions on the most modest scale compatible with his social position; his friendships were practical, and limited to a few persons in the City who were useful to his undertakings; and, like a practical man, he had married a fine woman of good family who could hold up her head with the best, and did it.

He enjoyed her triumphs as though they were his own; and even when she put her foot upon his own neck was proud of her for the achievement. Last and greatest proof of approbation, he had left her all his money, confident that she would use it and in her turn leave it to the best advantage to Maria. If ever he could be said to give way to sentiment

or even to entertain it, it was in his daughter's case, but even his love for her was practical. He was not so well content as his wife was to provide for her a husband of good birth, good looks, and a good heart, and would have been very willing to dispense with all three of them could a suitor have been found with fifty thousand pounds to make up the deficiency.

Sir Reginald was the very antipodes of his host; they had both pride indeed, but of a very different sort. In Sir Abraham's case it was purse pride, whereas the other had much more of hauteur in his mien and manner since he had become the tenant of the steward's house than when he had been master of Medbury. His pride was that of lineage, and now that he had lost the stately and beloved home which had, as it were, witnessed to it, it behoved him to remind himself and others from how long a line of ancestors he was descended. They were looking down upon him even now from the walls of the room

where he sat as guest instead of master, a reflection that would have been intolerable to most men in his position, and would have been even to himself but for a certain reason.

Captain Francis Drake, though a son after his father's heart, was far from being one after his pattern. The sense of duty in him was exceedingly strong; it had led him many times up to the cannon's mouth, once under such conditions as to extort admiration from a whole army, the record of which feat had been placed on his breast by the hand of his Queen. It had caused him (still more courageous deed) to side with the alien and the oppressed against those of his own race and creed, and to incur a widespread unpopularity upon that account among those whose opinion was dearest to him. And finally, when that judgment had been reversed and reparation was beginning to be made to him, duty had led him to throw up the position which he had so adored and adorned, in order to become the solace of his

father's evil and declining days. The Captain had left home at an early age, and even when quite a stripling had begun to think for himself. He shared few of his father's opinions, though, as they formed a part of the old Baronet's very nature, his natural kindness of heart as well as his filial love prevented him from combating them. It would have pained Sir Reginald to the quick had he known the feelings with which his son regarded the loss of the family acres. Of course he regretted that they had gone, but for many years they had been possessed only in name. Many mortgages had pressed on the estate, which had consequently been ill-managed, and the tenants had suffered from the scanty means and, it must be added, the imprudence of their landlord. 'The Castle must be kept up at whatever sacrifice,' had always been the old Baronet's reflection; and there had been painting and renewing in all directions to effect this object. If it had not been for the way in which his

father took his change of residence to heart; the son would have been better content with the keeper's cottage and its moderate comforts than he had been in the hereditary mansion with its hollow ostentation, paid for, at least in part, out of the pockets of others. The arrival of Sir Abraham with his ready money, though personally he was by no means so popular as his predecessor, had been a great comfort to the community. The gates around Medbury no longer hung upon one hinge, and the roofs of the cottages, if a trifle less picturesque, kept out the weather.

In his dealings with Sir Reginald himself too, as the Captain had freely confessed, Sir Abraham had behaved with liberality, though in truth in this matter he gave him the credit which was due to Sir Abraham's better half. Except by contrast, Lady Barton's disposition was certainly not remarkable for generosity; but she did not grudge spending where an object was to be obtained, and she had the

sagacity to foresee that liberality to the late master of Medbury would not be thrown away, either personally or in the general opinion, by his successor. In persuading her husband to stand for Shingleton, she had inflicted no fresh blow upon Sir Reginald, for, though his political opinions differed from Sir Abraham's, Shingleton had always returned a Radical member; though, indeed, there were growing signs of serious opposition from the other side, over which Sir Reginald chuckled with some complacency. It was, however, unmixed with ill-nature. The subject of the next election, the result of which was at present very uncertain, formed a frequent topic of conversation at the dinner-table, notwithstanding the risk of little explosions from the present member of the borough, such as has been already chronicled.

As Sir Reginald was placed at the right hand of his hostess, and Hester in the same place of honour at the other end of the table, it followed that she sat next the Captain, with

Maria opposite. It was this propinquity, perhaps, that caused Captain Drake to address her in a voice that was not always audible to the rest of the company, or perhaps the sight of her deep mourning and pale face, coupled with what he knew of her circumstances, touched him, and rendered his tone lower and more tender than usual. Hester explained it to herself upon the latter ground, and was grateful to him for his sympathy; nay, though she did not confess it to herself, his words were sweet to her, certainly more welcome than those of any other man of whom she had hitherto found herself the neighbour at any dinner-table. It was natural that it should be so; that in circumstances in which she stood so much in need of sympathy she should turn to one who, by comparison with the others, was almost an old friend; but, like many pleasant things in which we indulge ourselves, there was a danger in it. If she had been conscious of this she would, for her own sake, have denied herself the least

luxury of the kind; but being in such need of friendship, and no deeper feeling having made itself apparent to her, it was no wonder that she gratefully accepted the Captain's attentions. After all, they were little more than common politenesses, and would, in any larger assembly, have escaped notice altogether; and the conversation was, on the whole, pretty general.

'Well, Maria, been in the slums to-day?' inquired Sir Abraham. It was his habit thus slightingly to speak of his daughter's philanthropic visits to Shingleton, but in reality he approved of them; they strengthened the claims of the sitting member.

'I have paid a visit or two to people who are not exactly in society, if that is what you mean, papa,' returned Maria, smiling. Nothing could disturb her good temper, not even a reference to her charities, though any mention of them was to the last degree distasteful to her.

'I hope you visited my friends the Fortescues,' said Sir Reginald.

'Where do they live?' inquired the host. 'Surely not in Shingleton. I never heard of them.'

'Yes, in Shingleton,' continued the Baronet slyly. 'Their habitation is literally as old as the hills; is it not, Miss Maria? Though I won't say it has been long in the family. I think the present head of the house was the first inhabitant.'

'Sir Reginald is speaking of some poor souls who live in the sand cliff,' explained Maria; 'they have literally their homes like the conies, and, apparently, have known no other. In summer they have not so much to complain of, but we must try and find a dwelling-place for them before the winter. Their door is but a few planks nailed together, and they have no windows.'

'Then they can't have any vote for the borough,' exclaimed Sir Abraham. 'Why, my

good girl, you are throwing your time away as well as my money.'

'Oh, papa! you should not talk like that, even in fun,' said Maria gravely. 'Think of people being so poor as not even to have a house over their heads.'

'But there is a house, and a very large one, built for their express accommodation,' returned the Knight, with an appreciative chuckle over his grim joke; 'there is the poor-house.'

'Did you see Mrs. Bertram to-day, Maria?' inquired Lady Barton in that incisive tone of hers, which always cut off her husband's supply of talk for the moment, though not always at the main.

'Yes, mamma,' answered the girl in a low tone; 'there is no improvement. Dr. Jones says it has now become a question of weeks.'

'Poor woman—I hope she liked the grapes.'

'Grapes! What grapes?' asked Sir Abraham quickly. 'I noticed the great bunch was

gone from the hot-house. You don't mean to say——'

'Mrs. Bertram's case is very peculiar,' observed Lady Barton, looking across to Hester. 'You must get Maria to take you to see her. She is evidently an educated woman and has seen much better days. She has been sent as a last chance, which, however, it seems has failed, to try our Shingleton air. She is a Londoner like yourself; and that is all we know of her, but we fancy she has some sad history.'

'Drink,' observed Sir Abraham sententiously; 'that's her history. I've seen the lady, and will bet a guinea drink is what is the matter with her. Under such circumstances grapes are a downright encouragement.'

'She doesn't drink *now*, at all events,' observed her ladyship coldly.

'Would if she could—can't get it,' murmured her husband.

The Captain had a strong sense of humour,

and his host's persistence—indeed, considering the heavy metal that was in readiness to be brought to bear against him, one might almost say heroism—in maintaining his own opinion tickled his very heart-strings. He could not repress a smile of amusement.

'Nay, if you are going to take Sir Abraham's side, Captain Drake,' exclaimed his hostess with pretended indignation, for, in truth, she was pleased to see the young man at his ease under her roof, 'when such things are said against our sex, we ladies had better withdraw,' and she gave the signal to retreat accordingly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BEFORE BREAKFAST.

Our first morning in a strange house, especially if we are going to remain in it for some time, is generally full of interest. It certainly was so with Hester Darrell at Medbury, awakened by the unaccustomed song of birds about the open window and the distant murmur of the little river; the latter had been silent hitherto, but there had been rain in the night, which had aroused its complaining notes. The freshness of the country air, in which that of the sea was mingled, was to one 'so long in city pent' delightful. The old-fashioned timepiece over the mantelpiece indicated an early hour, a very unfashionable one, indeed, to rise at, but she got up at once and dressed. To even the most

conventional of us, I suppose there have been mornings when it has seemed a sin to be lying in bed while all nature is beckoning us to be out of doors—when the reflection has struck us that all that indescribable beauty is daily lost upon the closed eye and the shut ear, and in a manner wasted; the workman sees it, but those who do not labour with their hands never see it, except when returning from some scene of dissipation, when its glow, obnoxious and unwelcome (like a policeman's bull's-eye turned upon the habitual offender), arouses a sense of guilt. Never before had Hester understood the full significance of the poet's line,

> The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,

as now when the fragrance of the woods and fields seemed to fill her very being, and the air to inspirit her like a trumpet.

Though poor and almost friendless, and in a manner dependent, she felt her life before her, and that she possessed the power of enjoying it. The God who had created that beautiful world

must surely have intended it for enjoyment. There had been times, not only when misfortune, as of late, had pressed upon herself, but when she had stood by sick-beds where the poor were lying, and perhaps doomed to lie there till death released them from pain and woe, when she had doubted of this. Selfish and shallow, indeed, must those natures be who have had no such doubts ; but to-day the sunshine was in her very heart.

She was well aware that in a house like Medbury no one, even of the domestics, would be stirring for some time, but something within her rebelled against confinement within doors. She crept quietly downstairs, and, finding her way to the front-door, noiselessly undid lock and bolt and gained her liberty. From the courtyard a postern opened upon the terrace, on which she stepped, and then stood motionless, enraptured by the scene.

Below the broad gravel walk, with its low stone parapet and urns of flowers, lay a

charming old-fashioned garden, from which the summer air came laden with a hundred scents; it was half-lawn half flower-bed, and sloped down to a broad moat limpid and clear, save where the shining water-lilies hid it with their starlike blossoms and huge leaves.

A flat-bottomed boat lay moored to the bottom of a flight of steps, and at once attracted her attention. Hester had learnt to row at Fromsham, and was passionately fond of being on the water; there could be no harm she thought—a proof perhaps that the sense of being a dependent at Medbury was not very strong—in indulging herself in that way now. She accordingly embarked, and slowly rowed herself along, now gazing into the moat itself, which mirrored the beauties about it, and now taking note of the more material surroundings. She passed under the low drawbridge with stooping head, and slowly circumnavigated the stately place. The castle was even larger than it had looked from a distance; in parts very

old, and even where comparatively modern, additions had been made bearing no trace of newness; the influence of the climate, assisted by the ivy-growth, had harmonised the whole. Though she had plenty of sentiment, Hester's nature could hardly have been called romantic or poetical; and amid the reflections induced by the spirit of the scene she could not shut out the idea of its incongruousness with its present possessor. Sir Reginald she could picture to herself appropriately enough in such a position, but not Sir Abraham. She even doubted whether Lady Barton, with all her imperiousness and sense of power, quite appreciated Medbury. Maria no doubt enjoyed it; the atmosphere breathed of peace and beauty, and could not but be acceptable to her pure and gentle nature; but even in her case something less magnificent would have seemed to suit her better. It was not that her position sat ill upon her; she was so good, and natural, and gracious that even had she been made a queen none but

a base mind could have resented it, or found her wanting in queenly worth; she would not have suited a King Cophetua, for there was nothing of the beggar girl about her, but she would have been a Griselda—a queen-angel, to whom the pomps and gauds of majesty would have seemed superfluous.

Whenever Hester thought of Maria it was with a sense of personal inferiority. 'If I were in her position,' was her reflection, 'I should be puffed up with pride and vanity; if she were in mine she would feel no disappointments nor sense of ill-treatment, but would simply find out for herself the nearest way to the path of duty, and undeviatingly pursue it.' In this, though she did herself some wrong, she did not over-estimate her friend. Maria Barton was one of those rare natures, and rarest perhaps in her own sex, which are independent, not only of mere externals, but of circumstance itself.

If the accidents of wealth and position had

not happened to her she would have been the same girl; and indeed, save by her surroundings, you would never have discovered that they *had* happened to her. Without being obtrusively religious, she was animated by a spiritual sense of duty in all she thought and did, and was, as it were, a child of heaven without knowing it.

'It's my belief,' said Sir Abraham on one occasion, when remonstrating with his wife on the extent of his daughter's charities, 'that our Maria was cut out for a nun.'

To do him justice, though he had no high opinion of nuns, he did not use the expression offensively, and was rather unprepared for her ladyship's retort, delivered with even more than her usual energy:

'Then I do beg, Sir Abraham, that you will keep that belief to yourself, since it may do a great deal of mischief.'

Hester had nearly gone round her new world when she came upon a spot where the

waters of the moat found a narrow outlet and leaped and bounded down their fern-fringed channel to the river beneath. The pathway by its side, sunk in its little glen, looked very tempting, and as there was, as she judged, still an hour or so to spare for solitary exploration, she moored her boat and left it. She had descended but a very few steps when, at a bend in the little river, there came into view, a tumbling weir with some eel-nets on it, on the platform of which stood a man, in a wideawake and knickerbockers, fishing. She stopped mechanically, and at the same moment the fisherman looked up from his occupation, and, catching sight of her, took off his hat. She bowed, for it was Captain Drake, and would have retreated at once, but that he had laid down his rod and was evidently coming up to meet her.

Hester's heart beat thick and fast, certainly not from physical exertion, since she had made none. She would much rather that the Captain

had gone on with his fishing, but she could hardly turn her back upon him since he had recognised her. He came up the hill with rapid strides, which did not, however, at all interfere with his breathing.

'This is, indeed, an unexpected pleasure,' he said, smiling. 'I thought that none but myself and Aurora were up and about so early.'

'It was the beauty of Aurora that tempted me,' said Hester.

'I have no such poetical excuse,' he answered. 'It is my Indian habits which got me up so early.'

'Have you caught any fish?'

'A few trout. I would offer them to you for breakfast, but that it would seem like a slight upon Sir Abraham's hospitality. His fish arrives from Shingleton every morning; bought on the beach to the great discontent of the local fishmongers. I hope you are pleased with Medbury.'

'"Pleased" is no word for it, Captain Drake; one feels almost inclined to borrow an observation made about another scene of beauty and say, "I fear I shall never be nearer heaven than now."'

'I hope that compliment is not confined to the place, but includes the company,' said the Captain, laughing.

'If paid to one of them at least it could hardly be called extravagant,' said Hester earnestly.

'That is very true,' returned the other with sudden gravity, 'though you have discovered it very quickly. You of course are speaking of your cousin. Those who know her best must needs esteem her most, but every one esteems her. She has been amongst us a very short time, yet there is no one in the neighbourhood so beloved as she. If we had but female suffrage the borough would have a popular candidate indeed.'

'That would not be at all in dear Maria's

way,' observed Hester. 'She seems to me the least self-seeking of mortals.'

'That is quite true. She reminds me of the poet's description of his wife, with a difference; she seems almost too good for human nature's daily food.'

'Yet her humanity is what one loves her for.'

'At all events it places her above all the so-called "divinities" among women that one has ever heard of,' said the Captain decisively. '"Talk of an angel," runs the proverb, "and one hears the rustle of her wings;" that is surely your cousin upon the terrace yonder.'

'Dear me, she has come to look for me in the moat like another Ophelia,' said Hester. 'I must at once relieve her apprehensions.'

With a nod and a smile she ran up the bank, and stepping lightly into the boat shot across the moat to join her friend. Maria came quickly down to meet her, and embraced her affectionately.

'I have been to your room and found you flown, dear; why, you are even an earlier bird than I am.'

'It is the new broom that sweeps clean, dear cousin; perhaps I shall never commit such an act of virtue again; but your domain looked so exquisitely beautiful from my window that I could not resist the temptation of making its nearer acquaintance. I took the liberty of taking your boat, you see.'

'You were quite right; there is no extra charge, as papa says,' said Maria, smiling.

'I have also been straying out of bounds,' continued Hester with the air of a penitent at confession; it was of course necessary to confess whom she had met, and somehow it seemed easier to do so in joking fashion than in sober narrative; 'where a little bird—though not such a little one either—has been singing your praises to me. I am sure those pretty ears of yours must have been burning. Can you guess who it was?'

'Somebody praising me? No, I am sure I cannot guess,' said Maria simply.

'You mean that in the universal chorus it is difficult to pitch upon the particular voice. I had no idea you were so conceited. What bird is it that dresses in knickerbockers, and fishes from the eel-pots in the early morning?'

Up to this moment Maria's face had been as calm and placid as that of some pictured saint who carried in her hand a palm-branch in place of a sunshade, but now it was overspread from brow to chin with a flush of carnation.

'You have guessed, I see,' said Hester gently. The colour had left the speaker's face. Notwithstanding that the sun was high by this time, a deadly chill had suddenly pervaded her. If she had been only dreaming with respect to a certain matter—if she had known all along that it was out of the region of actual possibility—she had been dreaming deeper than she imagined, and the suddenness with which she had been awakened had given her a shock. In

that instant the future which she had shadowed out for herself took a material form; the river of life, as she had pictured it, became frozen, the Might-be had become the Must-be for good and all. At the same moment, so marvellous are the powers of thought, certain words which her cousin had spoken to her, during their interview in Welham Street, for the first time recurred to her memory.

'It was not a thing that any girl should have told. He knows nothing about it himself.'

How could she ever have forgotten them? she now wondered; how could she have yesterday—thank Heaven it had been but for one day—have failed to see their application?

'I suppose you mean Captain Drake,' said Maria in trembling tones. 'I did not think he would have praised me—to you.'

'Why not? I do not doubt he would have praised you had he been speaking even to your enemy—if, indeed, you could have an enemy—

how much more, then, to one who is your friend? Why not to me, to whom you have been so good and kind, and who love you so dearly?'

'I do not know; that is, I feared—oh, I cannot tell you what I feared, Hester!'

'Then it must be something that in your eyes—which means in truth—I ought to be ashamed of. Think better of me, Maria.'

'No, it would be nothing to be ashamed of,' returned the other hastily, 'it would have been quite natural. I know now by your manner that I was mistaken, but I feared—you see it is not as if you had met him for the first time; though even in that case what should I have had to complain of, if being what you are he should have preferred—no, I don't mean that, for it would have been no matter of choice at all, since he has never said one word of love to me. But it seemed possible, before you came, that he might have got to like me some day; and yesterday, when I saw you get out of the

carriage together, and heard you speak to him as to an old friend, and watched your faces—it was very foolish and very wrong—but I thought my dream of life was over, Hester, and—and that I had lost him for ever.'

'No, dear, no, it was not so,' returned Hester in low firm tones. 'If Captain Drake—which I am sure is not the case—had ever entertained such an idea in his mind I could not share it. There are reasons, unnecessary for me to enter into, but insurmountable reasons why that could never be. It is ridiculous to speak of such things, and scarcely becoming concerning one whom I have never met but once or twice in my life—a mere stranger; but you have forced me to do so. Once for all, I tell you that whatever happens that can never be. Let not your tender heart be henceforth troubled for one instant about such a foolish matter. You dear, dear girl! to think that I should have ever made you jealous!'

The laughter was on Hester's lips as she said

it, and a look of affectionate reproach in her blue eyes. It was a perfect piece of acting. And, however the result fell short of her deserts, in failing to compensate her for what she suffered, she had at least had her reward.

Maria's mild and thoughtful face was positively transformed with joy.

'I was not jealous, darling,' she murmured, with the tears in her soft eyes. 'I had no right to be jealous; but I was very, very unhappy. And now there is not a cloud on the face of my sky.'

There probably was a cloud, thought Hester pitifully to herself, of the size and exact shape of a man's hand, which would be far from detracting from the serenity of the other's heaven, but she only kissed her cheek and pressed her fingers by way of reply. Her desolate heart, only too conscious now of the full extent of its calamity, was too full for speech; a sound like a knell was in her ears, but she

hardly knew whether it came from without or from within.

'There is the breakfast-gong,' said Maria cheerfully. 'I must go in and make papa's tea.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MARIA AT WORK.

It was no slight relief to Hester that her aunt did not make her appearance at the morning meal, but took it, as such great ladies are wont to do, in her own apartment. She looked forward with dread to the inspection of that keen eye, which could hardly have failed to detect some trace of the emotion which agitated her bosom. She had made unconscious self-sacrifices before in her life, for her nature was a singularly unselfish one, but now she was but too well aware of what she had done. She did not regret it; she felt, indeed, if Maria's apprehensions were founded on fact, that she would have been doing a most ungrateful and cruel act in permitting herself to become her

rival. At a time when such a state of things could never have been contemplated, this simple girl had made her a confidante of her tender secret, and knowing that Maria's happiness was centred in Francis Drake, it would have been base indeed of her to have made shipwreck of it; she was not indeed certain that it was in her power to do so, but since matters had come to this pass, it was as impossible to deceive herself respecting the tone and manner of Captain Drake towards herself as to ignore her own feelings with respect to him. The occasions on which she had met him had, it is true, been few, but on each of them, and especially on this last—that very morning—his looks and words had been freighted with a meaning which was difficult to be misunderstood. If he was aware of Maria's affection for him, she felt only too certain that it was not reciprocated in the same tender form. He had praised her, indeed, and unstintingly, but not as a man praises the woman he loves. He had

described her as 'something too good for human nature's daily food;' he had said that those who knew her best loved her most; but that was the language of respect and not of affection. Such eulogies, if expressed more plainly, would almost have found their paraphrase in 'a paragon of a woman, but not, I must confess, to my taste if I were choosing a bride.'

If that reflection did not cross Hester's mind at the time, and I am inclined to think it did, for such deductions are obvious to all girls, it occurred to her now with pitiless plainness. It was even possible, she thought, that he had intended to produce that impression upon her, that he had wished her to understand, however matters seemed to point in that direction, that there was no attachment beyond that of friendship and neighbourhood between Maria Barton and himself. And now, too, for the first time it struck her that matters did point in that direction. Her mind, although she had not been conscious of it, had hitherto been too full

of her own relations with Francis Drake to admit the reception of what had been going on around her, as regarded his position in respect to others. It had not occurred to her that propinquity was hardly a sufficient reason for Sir Reginald and his son, so alien from Sir Abraham in their dispositions and opinions, being his constant guests; however satisfactory had been the business arrangements between the past and present masters of Medbury, it could scarcely have produced so close a friendship. That it was promoted and nourished of course by the influence of Lady Barton (without which, indeed, it could hardly have existed at all), Hester had guessed, but up to the present moment had not troubled herself to inquire why. The reason was now plain to her. Her ladyship, no doubt with Sir Reginald's approbation, had planned her daughter's union with his son and, to borrow a quotation from the matrimonial market, 'the young people were being thrown together.'

That Maria herself was ignorant of this Hester felt certain; her innocent and simple nature would have shrunk from the employment of any strategy, however harmless, and much more from one planned with such an object. So far from being one of those damsels errant who will marry their knight in spite of himself, rather than lose him, she would consult his happiness before her own, and in her humility of heart feel no surprise at his preferring another. By her own self-sacrifice it was clear to Hester that this best of girls would be made the happiest of women. It was made and would never be repented of, but just now, with her wound so fresh, it was difficult to conceal the pangs it cost her. If her heart could have been laid bare, Lady Barton would have been welcome to read it; but, as that was impossible, it was a great relief to Hester that her hostess was not present to take note of an agitation that would certainly not have escaped her searching eyes. Maria herself saw nothing of

it; in her own supreme content, the trouble of her friend escaped her; for the first time in her life, self-satisfaction, the selfishness of love, blinded her to the woes of another. As to Sir Abraham, his interest never strayed beyond his own affairs, or his sympathy beyond his daughter. That he was conscious that there was a third person at the breakfast-table, who was his guest, was made evident by his offering her various articles of food, but she might have been a dumb-waiter for any further notice that he took of her.

'Why, Maria, my girl,' he said, 'you look uncommon fresh and smiling this morning. What is it all about?'

This vague inquiry, somewhat indistinctly expressed, from its being made with his mouth full of muffin, embarrassed poor Maria exceedingly. Her regard for truth was staunch, such as can rarely be imagined by the ordinary free-born Briton; yet to answer such a question categorically was out of the question. 'I have

been in the garden with Hester,' she answered with a deep blush.

'Gathering roses, eh?' replied the Knight with gallantry. 'Still, that don't account for your lively looks. My belief is that you are intent upon some scheme of benevolence at my expense. I always notice that when you're in high spirits—which, fortunately, don't often happen—that a leaf is missing out of my cheque-book. Now confess, are you not going into Shingleton to spend my money?'

'It is no great credit, papa, to your intelligence to guess that much,' returned Maria with unwonted sauciness, 'since you heard Hester and me planning a visit there at the dinner-table last night; but I don't know that I have any particular eye to your spoliation.'

'Glad to hear it,' growled the Knight; 'times are very bad; let me tell you, money's tight.'

Money was always tight with Sir Abraham.

When the occasion seemed sufficient he would spend his thousands; but to separate his sixpences from one another without good cause, and some practical and natural reason for their disseverance, was pain and grief to him. There were many anecdotes in illustration of this peculiarity of his afloat in Shingleton, for though he had done a good deal for the borough, he could not change his nature to oblige his constituents. A man with a basket full of prawns had once asked his custom.

'I like prawns, my man,' had been his frank reply; 'but they must be fresh prawns.'

'These are just out of the sea, Sir Abraham; they have not been biled ten minutes.'

'Very well. Let me taste one; if you have told me the truth, I'll buy some; if not, I won't. Just as you please, you know.'

The man hesitated, then consented.

Sir Abraham took one, eat it, and made a wry face. 'I believe they are last year's prawns, you scoundrel!'

'What, taste and not buy! A pretty thing indeed to carry a basket of prawns for folks to taste for nothing!'

'You are trying to get money under false pretences; but you won't succeed with me, my fine fellow.'

'Ah!'—an interjection more expressive than the 'Ugh' of Mr. Fenimore Cooper's American Indians—'no wonder they calls you Father Abraham. You ought to 'ave three 'ats on your 'ead.'

He had also had a passage of arms with a flower-girl; he had bought a rose of her, which, being somewhat too full blown, had fallen to pieces after it had been a few moments in his button-hole, and he had insisted on its being made good to him out of her basket. His daughter happened to be with him, and had arranged matters by the secret bestowal of another sixpence; but that had not prevented the incident from being quoted against him.

Maria herself was far from suffering in Shingleton from her father's too practical ways; it is probable that she showed brighter by contrast; but at the same time she unquestionably did him service and lessened the tide of unpopularity that threatened to sweep him from his seat in Parliament. Sir Abraham was not a bad canvasser, where it was not necessary to put his hand into his pocket. The mere laying aside of the curt manner that was natural to him was taken by people as a compliment, and when he did so his somewhat coarse humour was very much appreciated; shallow folks imagined that it was for them, and not their votes, that he cast off his husk and showed the kernel, and pronounced him a rough diamond. With Captain Paul, of the *Javelin*, dissipated and disreputable as he was, he would have drunk a gallon of whisky and water with the utmost apparent good fellowship, and would even have permitted that gallant commander to

pay for it; while with that genteel invalid, Miss Nicobar, he made himself agreeable by discussing her ailments with a freedom that could not have been exceeded by her own medical adviser. This ancient spinster's thoughts were as much monopolised by her own body and its ailments as those of any monk in cell by the shortcomings of his soul, and whatever went wrong with other people affected her just as much or little as in his case. Her maid, Hephzibah, was the sole individual in whom she professed the least interest, and that only because her services were indispensable to her. She kept her mistress's spirits up by expressing the most sanguine views on the smallest possible provocation.

'I think I got up those steps on the Parade to-day, Heppy, better than yesterday,' Miss Nicobar would doubtfully observe to her afterwards.

'Better, ma'am! You went up 'em, I was going to say, like a bird; but, at all events,

quite like another person. By this time next year, I'll bet my life on it, you'll be yourself again.'

'Do you really think so? But I shall never be able to walk alone without your arm.'

'I did not say that, ma'am,' was the precipitate reply, 'for I think you will always require somebody at your elbow, as it were, who thoroughly understands your little ways; but you're on the mend; those were the very words that I used to Sir Abraham the other day, when he was inquiring about you so particularly—"my mistress is on the mend."'

'They may say what they like about Sir Abraham, but he has his good points,' would be Miss Nicobar's response. 'He keeps his sympathies for people of condition, those who really suffer. Common folks are born to a certain amount of discomfort, or, if not, they get inured to it; they have not the delicate organisation that we have—that is, I mean, that I have.'

'Just so, ma'am,' put in Hephzibah humbly. 'Poor people are put into the world to minister to the rich; that is my mission as regards you, at all events, I am very sure.'

'It will not go unrewarded, Heppy, when I am dead and gone, no doubt.' Here Miss Nicobar would stop on purpose; she knew the advantage of leaving such possibilities to the imagination, and the wretched Hephzibah, though consumed with curiosity to know every detail of the document thus hinted at, would be compelled to exclaim, 'Don't speak of such dreadful things, dear mistress, I do beg.'

Miss Nicobar preferred Sir Abraham to his daughter, who, she thought, neglected her. Since she visited the sick, it surely behoved her especially to visit *her*, who, besides that claim, was socially in a position to be visited. Other things being equal, it seemed quite incredible to her that any one should prefer a poor person to a rich one.

'What makes Miss Barton go among all

those dreadful people, when she comes to me so seldom, I can't conceive. I suppose she likes to play the great lady and patronise them. Nothing is more offensive, to my mind, than patronage; and were I in their case, rather than sacrifice my independence, and submit to the whims and caprices of a fellow-creature, merely for what I could get out of them, I would rather starve.'

'So would I, ma'am,' responded Hephzibah fervently; 'I would far rather starve.'

In the moral atmosphere engendered by Miss Nicobar and her toady it is easy to believe that Maria Barton found it difficult to breathe, and as the disinfection of it was altogether beyond her powers, no wonder she avoided it. She regretted the circumstance, because her attention had been drawn to Miss Nicobar and her ailments by her father himself. 'It will be a charity,' he had said, 'to go and see that poor sick woman, Maria;' but he had not thought it necessary to add that the poor sick

woman owned a good deal of house property in the borough, and could command, or at least influence, a round dozen of votes. He had, however, taken his daughter's confession of failure with great good-humour. 'Very good, my dear, if you can't get on with her, leave her alone.' He had the sense to perceive that her visits in that quarter would do him more harm than good, and flattered himself that he had taken the measure of Miss Nicobar's foot himself.

I am afraid, as regards her father's interest, Maria was not judicious in the selection of her Shingleton sick folk; very few of them had votes at all. On the day on which Hester first accompanied her on her rounds there was certainly no faintest aroma of politics to be discovered anywhere. Their first visit was to Shingleton Keep, an old ruin apart from the town, set in picturesque grounds, solitary enough in general, but on holidays a great resort of excursionists and picnic parties. It was

tenanted by one Parkes, a gardener, and his wife, whose only daughter, Janet, was, as Maria informed her friend, in a hopeless consumption. She had been a very pretty girl, and was comely still, though terribly wasted and emaciated. Her appearance reminded Hester of Tennyson's Queen of the May, as described in the second part of the poem; but her condition of mind was very different. She was still able to sit in the garden, which they entered at once, without calling at the house, and there they found her, sheltered from the wind, and propped with pillows, looking out to sea.

'You seem better this morning, Janet,' said Maria cheerfully enough, but by no means with that ecstatic gratulation which Hephzibah used to her mistress upon occasions of less marked improvement.

'Yes, miss, thank you, I am much better. I feel as if I had now turned the corner and was going to get about again.'

'I have brought my friend Miss Darrell,' said Maria, without noticing the other's remark, 'to see your charming garden and this beautiful view.'

Hester expressed her admiration for both, as indeed she might well do. The whole stretch of the coast both north and south was visible for miles. The dying girl pointed out its various features with amazing animation. 'The headland that closes our view to the south,' she said, 'is Saltby Foreland. There are excursions to Saltby all through the summer, but they are over now. I have only been able to go once, but the doctor promises me I shall make one of the first spring trip.'

It was terrible to Hester to hear her, for it seemed to her that the girl was on her deathbed.

'Some say, miss, that the old *Javelin* is to be broken up and a new steamer given to the town by Sir Abraham; is that so?'

'Upon my word, Janet, I don't know,' said

Maria, gravely smiling. 'The spring is a long way off, you know, and there is no knowing what may happen in the meantime. My father, or I, or you, may not be in this world by that time.'

'Very true, miss; Sir Abraham is getting old, no doubt.'

Maria bent down and whispered something in her ear.

'No, not to-day, miss,' was the somewhat petulant rejoinder; 'thank you, I don't feel quite inclined for being read to; I want to enjoy my life, it hasn't been often of late weeks that I have been able to do it.'

'Do you suffer much?' inquired Hester tenderly.

'Why, yes, I have done, especially o' nights. I don't like the night, it's long, and dark, and lonesome; sometimes I think that it will never end.' She shuddered, and a sharp hacking cough seized her and checked her utterance.

'We must not make you talk, Janet,' said Maria decisively. 'I have brought you some grapes; flowers I don't venture to bring, for those at the Keep are at least as sweet and beautiful as any we have at the Castle, are they not, Hester?'

'They are, indeed,' said Hester, and in truth they were so numerous that the air would have been too heavy with their perfume had it not been for the breeze from the sea.

'I love the flowers,' said the sick girl in musing tones, 'and I love the sun; but I have had but little pleasure in them this summer, but, now that I am really better, I am so looking forward to the spring.'

They left her, after some more talk, and looked in at the Keep to leave the grapes, where her mother was busied with some household work.

'Janet seems quite peart this morning, Mrs. Parkes.'

The woman's eyes, which had looked mournful enough, brightened up at once.

'Yes, the dear child is certainly better; seems more like herself, don't she, miss?'

'It must be, at all events, a great comfort to you not to see her suffer.'

'The spring-bed you sent her has spared her something in that way, Miss Maria, and, as you say' (Maria had said nothing of the kind), 'there is certainly some sort of improvement.'

As the two girls descended the hill Hester expressed her wonder at her friend's late reticence; it had seemed to her that she had, by her silence, almost encouraged delusive hopes in both the parent and child.

'It seems so, I dare say,' said Maria gently, 'but no one is really deceived, Hester. The poor mother knows her daughter's condition, even better than the doctor, and Janet knows it too, except on rare occasions such as these, when a sort of Indian summer of convalescence

seizes her. It would be as cruel to shatter such short-lived happiness as to wake a sick man from a pleasant dream. To-morrow she will be amenable enough.'

'No doubt you are right, but to hear the poor girl talk of excursion trips in the spring made my heart sick with pity.'

'That is as much a part of her disease, my dear Hester, as her cough or her emaciation. Moreover, you are as likely to be in the wrong as regards the limit of her earthly pilgrimage as she in the sanguine views of her eventual recovery. It is quite possible that she may live on to the spring, though hardly beyond it.'

The confidence with which Maria had enunciated her convictions, and the quiet determination with which she had carried them out, contrasting as they did with her characteristic humility of spirit and thought, astonished Hester not a little; with all her respect, and even admiration for her, she had

not hitherto given her credit for good judgment; she had in fact only studied her nature in matters relating to herself, in which respect the more unselfish a woman is, the less wise, and provident, and practical, she commonly shows herself.

Maria in London, out of her element, and dealing only with the surface of things, and Maria at home, and at work, were two very different beings.

CHAPTER XXIX.

VISITING.

On their way back to the town, Maria pointed to some holes in the cliff at some height from the ground, to which a narrow pathway gave access. 'That is where our friends reside of whom Sir Reginald was speaking last night,' she said; 'would you like to pay them a visit?'

'Do you really mean to say that people live there?'

'Unquestionably they do; our original ancestors, the cave-dwellers, may perhaps have lived there (geology admits of it) before them; but they were probably allowed to kill the rabbits that dispute with them the possession of the sand cliff, which these poor people are

not suffered to do. The master and mistress of the house are rarely at home in the morning, but we shall doubtless see the young people.'

As they drew nearer they had cause to admire the ingenuity with which every portion of this 'No-man's ground' had been taken advantage of by the squatters. Little strips of vegetables and even flowers were growing on the almost perpendicular soil in patches, like strips of carpet hung from a balcony on a gala-day. The various caves (for there were many of them) had each its several use; in one were a few meagre fowls, in another a pig, so thin and long-nosed that it had a strong resemblance to a greyhound. The third cave was the day-nursery of the family, a plank or two set up lengthways prevented egress, but it was of so moderate a height that the four children it was its mission to confine showed their curly heads and ruddy faces above it.

'Mit Maria, Mit Maria!' cried the eldest girl in high glee as she caught sight of her

visitor; her two sisters essayed to imitate her welcome, and a boy, the youngest of the four, clapped his little hands together and 'chortled in his joy.'

'How glad they seem to see you, and how well fed and jolly they look!' exclaimed Hester with pleased surprise.

'We are not starved by any means,' returned Maria, reciprocating the welcome of her young friends; 'but we want to be able to play about like other children, and not be penned up like sheep for fear we should fall down the cliff; don't we, Dot, don't we, Tilda?'

'Toys, we want more toys, Mit Maria,' pleaded number three in a tone of some resentment, all other subjects seeming to her of small importance, and impertinent, by the side of this paramount essential.

'I have brought you a toy, Polly,' said Maria, producing the article from the same basket that had held the grapes; 'a little doll's

house which you can all play with; I wish I could give you a real house.'

This was not the children's view, who in a moment were rapt in their new acquisition, and could hardly be induced to withdraw their attention from it to answer another question.

'Like many of us children of a larger growth,' said Maria, smiling, 'they put enjoyment first and leave all serious matters to take care of themselves; but the fact is, the dear little things are not so strong as they look; what you take for rude health is sunburn, and a winter in this exposed place would probably be fatal to one, if not all of them. Want of air is not the fault here as in so many dwellings of the poor. There is plenty of accommodation; a dining-room and drawing-room, you see, for example, but these caves are too damp and cold, except for summer weather.'

'And do you think you will be able to get them a house before the frost and snow come?'

inquired Hester, as they came down the hill after their survey.

'That very one, I hope,' said Maria, pointing to a corner house in a row of buildings with which the town, as it were, commenced in that direction.

'Indeed! It will seem to your *al fresco* friends a very sumptuous palace, by comparison with that which they have been accustomed to.'

'The very observation I made to Captain Drake, who has been good enough to manage the matter for me,' said Maria with a slight blush; 'but the fact is, although papa may have to pay a little money, we think he will not grudge it, because his new tenant will have a vote for the town.'

There was a touch of sly amusement, almost of roguery in Maria's face as she made this confession, which moved Hester (though, in truth, she was in no mood for laughter) to downright mirth.

'I had no idea you had so much of the

wisdom of the children of this world, Maria,' she exclaimed. 'I find there are two sides to your character, and what is still more surprising, the worse is a *good* side.'

'One is obliged to be a little diplomatic in these matters,' answered Maria, smiling; 'the violent may take the Kingdom of Heaven by force, but they take it for themselves; as a general rule people have to be coaxed into doing good. I know I have peculiar views on this subject, but it seems to me, so long as no deceit is employed or harm done, that good should be brought about, to use the apostolic phrase, "by all means." There were some races here in the summer which, of course, mamma did not attend; I believe races and gambling of all kinds do an infinity of mischief.'

Hester bowed her head in assent; the gesture hid her face, which had suddenly grown very pale and pained.

'Well, I got a poor-box set up in the grand

stand, and after the races were over we found no less than six-and-thirty pounds in it. What did it matter to those to whom it brought necessaries, comforts, and, perhaps, even health itself, from whence it came? And what but good could come of it to those who gave it? Perhaps it offered them the opportunity of doing the only act of charity they ever did in their lives. Captain Drake says, that if the same experiment were tried in all such places, tens of thousands of pounds would be so collected. The "unclean thing" some good people called it, who, nevertheless, are willing enough to take subscriptions from the wickedest people. This resolute turning of our backs upon everything of which we do not approve, though, unhappily, it may form the occupation of numbers of our fellow-creatures, only helps to cut them off from all good influences; and, at all events, why should we leave a stone unturned —and even those who frequent racecourses are not stones—to help the poor?'

Hester gazed at her friend in amazement. She had assisted the West girls in their charities and, through them, had been brought into connection with charitable and religious people; but these large views were presented to her for the first time. Moreover, the very last person in whom she would have expected to find them was Maria Barton.

'I am afraid I have shocked you, Hester,' continued the other, smiling; 'I'm afraid I do shock people sometimes.'

'Not at all,' said Hester, but, in truth, she was more astonished than ever. The idea of Maria's shocking people was tremendous; it was as though a glow-worm should have suddenly developed the powers of an electric battery.

'The person we are going to visit now,' pursued Maria quietly, 'is very different from any of those upon my ordinary list. You heard us speaking last night of Mrs. Bertram; hers is a very sad and peculiar case. I had a great

deal of difficulty in getting on with her at first, but now we are great friends.'

'That is the woman whom Sir Abraham said——'

'Yes, yes, you must not mind all papa says; he doesn't really mean to be hard upon people; his account of the matter may in this case even be correct, but we have nothing to do with the past of anybody, our business is with their present, and, as far as may be, poor souls, with their future.'

'Mrs. Bertram is not a poor person, I suppose,' said Hester, for they had stopped at a house in a small but very respectable terrace, commanding—which meant money in Shingleton—a fine view of the sea.

'No, she is not poor, though I sometimes fancy that the provision that is made for her does not come out of her own pocket.'

As the door was opened to them a bluff, good-humoured man of middle age met them in the passage.

'Well, doctor, how is your patient this morning?' inquired Maria, addressing him.

He shook his head. 'No better,' he said; 'and I am afraid not likely to be. She has just had a little bit of chicken, but it don't eat like victuals, Miss Maria.' He said 'heat,' but he said it very sympathetically. 'It is a bad sign when we don't enjoy our chicken.'

'And I suppose nothing else would tempt her?'

'Nothing that wouldn't do her more harm than good,' was the significant rejoinder.

Maria sighed and entered the house. 'That is one of the best men I have ever known,' she whispered to Hester, as the servant preceded them up the narrow stairs; 'but he is not good enough for some of his fellow-creatures, because he leaves out his h's.'

Hester blushed, for she was conscious of having taken note of the circumstance.

'It doesn't matter to me,' she answered, smiling, 'because my name lends itself to

eccentricities of that kind. Hester and Esther is all one, you know.' Yet somehow she felt that it did matter to her. In the sense of comparison, as between things that are the ingredients of the cup of life and those that are the mere 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim,' she began to recognise, as in all else, the superiority of her friend.

The next moment they were in the invalid's apartment.

On a sofa at a window looking out to sea lay the lady they had come to visit. She had not yet passed middle age, her bright brown hair was unstreaked with grey, and when she smiled, as she did when they entered the room, she could almost have been called good-looking. The wonder was, considering the regularity and delicacy of her features, why she fell short of beauty. The cause of failure were her eyes, which, though large and soft, were void of life, and almost without expression.

'I have ventured to bring my cousin Hester

with me, whom I trust you will not treat with any ceremony,' said Maria gently; 'if you attempt to rise, Mrs. Bertram'—for the invalid, with not a little agitation of manner, had made as if she would have risen to her feet—'I shall have to ask her to wait for me below. You have heard me speak of Miss Darrell, you know, and how we were looking forward to having her at Medbury.'

'Yes, yes, I have heard of Miss Darrell,' said Mrs. Bertram, a flush of excitement lighting up her faded face. 'Colonel Darrell's daughter, is she not?'

'I *was* his daughter,' said Hester softly, glancing at her black dress with the idea of helping out her hostess, who was regarding her with that dazed yet fixed expression that betokens a mind astray.

'Aye, aye; they are very different, "was" and "is,"' was the unexpected reply, delivered with a deep sigh; 'a handsome man he was, with a kind face.'

'Did you know papa, then, Mrs. Bertram?'

'Yes; that is, by sight,' she answered hastily; 'long ago, long ago.' Her voice, which Hester had noticed was husky, though by no means harsh, had suddenly grown pathetic; her last words seemed to die away like an echo.

'What a beautiful view you have from your window,' observed Hester cheerfully; a commonplace remark enough, as she was well aware, but there was something in Mrs. Bertram's gaze, which was still fixed upon her, that unaccountably embarrassed her. It was evident that she had awakened in her some personal reminiscence that gave her pain.

'Yes, one seems to be at the edge of the world—to which, indeed, I have turned my back for ever—looking out on eternity.'

'We must all look at it some day,' said Maria softly; 'and the more familiar we get to it the more welcome it becomes.'

'With you that may be so,' said the invalid

drily; 'but as for me, I can only hope it's wholesome, for it isn't pleasant. I feel like those would-be saints of old, who bespoke their coffins years before they had any occasion for them, and all day long used to contemplate their narrow home. I suppose they got accustomed to the idea in time, but I doubt whether they liked the notion of being buried any better for it.'

'It was a very material view of death,' remarked Maria gravely.

'No doubt; they were probably material people; most of us are, for that matter. Don't you think your cousin rather an exceptional person in that way, Miss Darrell?'

'I am sorry to say—sorry, that is, as regards the rest of us—that I do,' said Hester, smiling.

'Spiritual, but far from *spirituelle*, eh? Some girls would think that anything but a compliment, but then she is so different from other girls. She is, as I often tell her—though

her visits here, I am thankful to say, are neither "few nor far between"—an angel. Sometimes I wish she knew a little more of this world, and would tell me news about it. I dare say you and I, Miss Darrell, have many friends in common in London, if we only knew it.'

'I have very few friends,' said Hester gently, and with a half-unconscious stress upon the last word.

'I can hardly believe that,' replied Mrs. Bertram coaxingly. 'You are one that must have friends, and are too young to have worn them out. Come, think; if I were appealing to your cousin I should say, "This is an act of Christian charity," but we are not all actuated by the highest motive; to you I say, "Humour an old woman who will trouble neither yourself nor any one else with her whims and fancies for long."'

'My list is very short, Mrs. Bertram,' said Hester, smiling, 'and it is very unlikely indeed that it should include any friend of yours.

When I have mentioned my old nurse Arkell, and Mrs. West and her daughters, and Mr. Langton, I have come to the end of all I can call my friends in London.'

Mrs. Bertram took up a fan which lay by her side, and moved it to and fro before her. It was a moment or two before she spoke, and when she did so her face was almost concealed by it.

'I have not the privilege of Nurse Arkell's acquaintance, certainly,' she said, with that attempt at gaiety which in persons who are very ill is always pathetic; 'but both the other names sound familiar to me. I know some Wests in Bloomsbury, not, however, a very fashionable quarter.'

'My Wests are not very fashionable either, so far,' replied Hester; 'but they live in Bayswater.'

Mrs. Bertram shook her head. 'No; they can scarcely be the same.'

'Mr. Langton lives in Mayfair.'

'So does—or did—the gentleman I once knew of the same name; do you know him well?'

'He was my father's dearest friend, as he is now mine,' said Hester with emotion.

'What is he like? Have you seen him lately?'

'I saw him only the other day. He is tall and very striking-looking; a noble presence, with grave kind eyes and a gentle voice and manner.'

'And young—does he look young?'

'No, he is not young; and besides, he has had troubles.'

'Aye, but he is well in health?'

'Oh yes; a very strong man, I should say, yet somehow one who seems to find very little enjoyment in life. I wish from my heart it was otherwise.'

'You are very fond of him, then?'

'Yes, indeed, I have reason to be.'

'And he is fond of you?'

'He thinks, at all events, much better of me than I deserve,' said Hester with a slight blush, not that she was ashamed of the confession, but because the other was regarding her over the top of her fan with such fixed intensity. 'But I have not told you his Christian-name, Mrs. Bertram, which will, perhaps, save all further explanations. It is Philip; do you know any Mr. Philip Langton?'

'There is no Philip Langton to be fond of me!' was the bitter rejoinder; then, as if suddenly recollecting herself, she added, with an effort: 'No, I should have asked you what his name was first, instead of pestering you with vulgar curiosity. Forgive me, young lady, I am old, and ill, and—dying.'

'There is nothing to forgive; I trust matters are not so serious with you as you imagine,' murmured Hester in great embarrassment and distress of mind. It was not only that Mrs. Bertram's manner was inexplicable to her, but the situation altogether was

beyond her experience. She knew not what to say or do.

Maria, however, was already pacifying the sick woman, plying the fan, and at the same time speaking to her in tender expostulating tones.

'Very good; you are always right,' was the murmured reply, 'but she must shake hands with me. I want to take her hand—her ungloved hand—in mine,' pleaded the invalid earnestly.

Hester took off her glove and held her hand out, which Mrs. Bertram scrutinised with rapt attention.

'I am a great fortune-teller, Miss Darrell, though I failed to foresee my own fate. You are not engaged to be married yet, it seems, but you soon will be.' Then she turned her face to the sea and burst into a passion of tears.

Maria took Hester by the arm, and hurried her with gentle force from the room. 'Do

not distress yourself, my dear,' she said, 'she will be better when she is left alone.'

'But what is the matter, Maria? Why should the sight of a total stranger like myself have put the poor lady in such a state?'

'I don't know. I told you she was very strange.'

'But, Maria, it is shocking to think of. Do you think it is possible that she has again been——'

'No, no,' interrupted Maria earnestly; 'she has given me her solemn promise never to do that. If she did it once, only once more, Dr. Jones tells me that it would be the death of her.'

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ENDORSED CHEQUE.

THERE are certain conditions of the body when a change of diet of any kind, the doctor tells us, even though it be to all seeming for the worse, is advantageous to us; and the same thing holds good of the mind. When it is inclined to brood over what is irremediable, anything—even a fresh trouble, if it only draws the thoughts away from the old groove —is preferable to stagnation. Thus it happened that after those somewhat sombre experiences of hers in Shingleton, including even that distressing scene with Mrs. Bertram, Hester returned to the Castle on the whole less troubled and despondent than she had quitted it. The position of affairs was,

of course, no better for her, but she had been reminded by what she had seen of what most of us, when in adversity, are apt to forget, that, far from being the only sufferers, our sorrows are small indeed beside those endured by tens of thousands of our fellow-creatures. Even if in her secret heart she had regarded Francis Drake as a maiden looks upon a lover, she had seen women that day who had lost even more than she had—widows whose husbands the sea had swallowed up, leaving them desolate indeed, or worse, with little ones without a bread-winner.

She had seen girls of her own age stretched on a couch of pain; from which after long years they would be carried forth to untimely graves. She had seen the aged, forlorn of children, waiting in poverty and discomfort for 'easeful death.' Her nature, indeed, was far from being one which derives consolation from the consciousness that others are worse off than themselves, but, noting how these terrible evils

were borne, on the whole, without complaint, she applied the lesson of patience and resignation to her own calamity.

It is one thing, however, to learn the lesson of life, and quite another—else how should those who have learnt it for threescore years and ten still fall into the old errors?—to put it into effect. Alone, or still better, in the society of her cousin, to whom she had begun to look as a disciple to her master, she was staunch and firm enough, She even felt a sort of complacency in the reflection that the sacrifice she had resolved to make was for one so pure and good; but in the presence of Francis Drake that fixed resolve was loosened, and her heart waxed faint and sick within her; the low, soft tones of his voice, the lingering clasp of his hand, were torture to her, for they were a temptation that was well-nigh irresistible. When she felt it strongest her eyes always turned to Maria, and in that calm and trustful face found safety. No evidence, even of her own senses, she felt,

would have shaken Maria's confidence in her word.

But it was not so with others; more than once Hester had become cognisant that Lady Barton's eyes were fixed on her with distrust and apprehension. Her hostess was not unkind to her; far from it. The strangeness of manner she had exhibited on their first meeting had never returned; her tone towards her was always gentle—at times, when they were alone together, indeed almost caressing, but when in Captain Drake's company her eyes regarded her with troubled looks.

Hester's position was a most difficult and embarrassing one. She avoided giving the Captain the least encouragement, but she could not, of course, be rude to him, and with that polite toleration of him he seemed only too content. Should he propose to her, thought Hester, it would be easy—no! Heaven help her! it would not be easy, but she would at least know what to say to him, and from that

time forth the peril, though not, alas! the pain, of her position would be over; in the meantime there was nothing for it but to 'suffer and be strong.' Even men—unless moralists and poets lie—sometimes find their whole being so rapt in their first love that it seems death to part from it. How then must a girl like Hester, homeless and almost friendless, who has found one man, and only one in the wide world to love her, and be beloved, have felt the necessity that compelled such parting! The strongest tie that nature weaves on earth is love with duty; but when they stand apart and in antagonism, how slight seems the strand that links us with earth at all!

At luncheon one day the midday post brought a letter to Hester, which reminded her by 'harsh evidence' that there are other matters in life than love, and which demand as serious an attention. The handwriting was familiar to her; it was that of Philip Langton; and as her eyes lit on it a little flush came into

her cheeks at the reflection how of late so true a friend had been forgotten. His missive was unlikely to contain reproaches, but should it do so she felt that she deserved them. She had promised to write to her guardian as soon as she found herself 'settled' at Medbury, and she had not written to him. In her present perturbation and distress of mind she had felt indeed anything but 'settled,' but that, of course, she could not give as her excuse; and he had some right to complain of her silence.

'Read your letter, Hester,' said Lady Barton encouragingly, 'since to judge by your face it has some interest for you.'

'It's in a gentleman's hand, I notice,' said Sir Abraham, who had handed it to her from the post-bag. 'Don't you think she had better take it to her own room?'

The raillery was not very delicate, but it showed that Hester had made some progress with the Knight. Her quiet, useful ways—she cut his newspapers open for him at breakfast,

while Maria made his tea—had won upon him, and he treated her less as an article of furniture. She might almost have been the governess—he had become so brusquely civil.

The incredulous smile which this insinuation evoked from Hester by no means pleased her hostess. She would far rather that her niece's correspondence should have been of a tender kind, or, as Sir Abraham would have expressed it, that there had been 'something in it;' but, indeed, she had pretty well given up all hope of there being any relief, as regarded the attentions paid by the Captain to Hester, from without.

'I will not have Hester teased, papa. You would not have liked it yourself at her age,' exclaimed Maria in tones of mock reproof.

The gravity of her nature had become relaxed of late, and permitted an occasional sally. She little knew that her gaiety was fed, as it were, at her friend's expense; that as her spirits rose those of her cousin dwindled.

Hester opened her letter, glanced hastily at its contents, and placed it in the pocket of her dress; and nothing more was said about it. After the meal was over, however, and mother and daughter found themselves alone together, Maria recurred to the incident.

'I am afraid Hester got bad news to-day, mamma. Did you see how pale she grew when she read that letter, and how she never touched a morsel afterwards?'

'I can't say I observed it,' was the dry reply.

It was only when Captain Drake was present that Lady Barton took any particular note of her niece's behaviour; and though she had no actual reason to complain of it, there were matters in her mind just then respecting Hester which prevented her feeling much sympathy with her private affairs.

'I am sure there is something wrong,' persisted Maria. 'I hardly know whether to go to her or not,' she added hesitatingly.

'She will come round sooner if you leave her to herself, I should think,' replied her ladyship indifferently.

'Oh, mamma! don't speak so coldly. Remember how all alone in the world the poor girl has been left. She has no home but this, and we should surely make it as happy a one as we can for her.'

'I am not aware, Maria, that I have fallen short of my duties as a hostess to Hester Darrell in any way,' said Lady Barton stiffly.

'But you are not only her hostess; you are her aunt. And—and—of course she is aware of *my* affection; but it would be so nice and good of you if you would now and then speak a word of sympathy to her; if she could think that you took her into your confidence ever so little. That would make her feel so much more at home.'

The girl spoke with hesitation, and with pleading, almost piteous, looks. With her love for her mother was mingled not a little fear.

So much, indeed, had the confidence of which she had spoken been wanting between them in her own case, that it had not existed even as regarded the subject nearest to her heart. It had not been volunteered, and she had not the courage to seek it. She had courage now, because she was asking for it for another; but it was not without trepidation that she did so. She would not have been astonished had her appeal met with a tart reply, and it was with no little satisfaction that she found it received at least with patience and attention.

'I should be sorry indeed,' said Lady Barton gravely, 'for you or anybody else to think that I was hard on Hester. Perhaps, as you suggest, it would be well if I found an opportunity—or made one—for a better mutual understanding between us. I will have a private word or two with your cousin this very day.'

It did not strike simple Maria that she had, in fact, made no suggestion of the sort; far

less did it enter into her mind that she had given her mother a cue for her own conduct with respect to Hester. Lady Barton had long had it in her mind to say that 'private word or two' to the girl of which she had hinted, though it would be on something very different from the subject on hand. The occasion for doing so was now offered her, and in such a way as would avoid arousing any suspicion on the part of her daughter—a very essential part of her plan.

Unconscious of her behaviour having been taken note of, Hester had retired to her room to take into consideration the letter which had so painfully affected her. As it is with our physical health, so it is with our mental troubles; that which ails us for the moment seems, while it lasts, to be the most serious calamity that can befall us. As she read Philip Langton's words even the cost of her self-sacrifice with respect to Francis Drake was forgotten; the pain of misplaced love found its anodyne in

what seemed a still severer torment, the imputation of disgraceful, or at the best, unmaidenly conduct. This, and nothing else, notwithstanding the delicate and tender terms in which the suggestion was couched, she knew, by the flush that dyed her brow and cheeks, and fired her brain, was laid to her charge. Even that safety-valve of human passion, in like circumstances—indignation against the accuser—was denied her, for though she knew in her own heart that she was innocent, it was no blame to him if he thought otherwise. Had *their* positions been reversed she acknowledged to herself that the term 'unmaidenly,' as applied to her own conduct, judged by all ordinary rules, would have been a mild and charitable one.

'My dear Hester,—I had not intended to write until I had news from yourself respecting your new friends, your silence about whom fills me at one time with hope, at another with apprehension—no doubt, as nurse Arkell tells me (whom I have consulted professionally on this

matter) in accordance with the state of my liver. Something has happened, however, so unexpected, grave, and inexplicable, that it compels me to communicate with you at once. There has been a certain matter between us, dear Hester, which, though it gave me no little anxiety and distress upon your account, I had contrived to put away from my mind; but it has now presented itself in such a form that, however painful to both of us, it is no longer possible to ignore it. I allude to the two thousand pounds, for which you affirmed you had such immediate need, while at the same time you gave me to understand it was for a purpose —had you been at liberty to disclose it—which would have had not only my own approval, but that of your late father. At a very considerable sacrifice—among other things of my own conscience, for my sense of duty as your trustee was not a little troubled by it—I acceded to your wishes, and where investigation would not only have been admissible, but, as I now perceive

too late, incumbent upon me, forbore to pain you by a single question. I gave you the cheque with misgivings indeed, but without distrust; and this evening it has come back to me from the bank, in the usual way of business, endorsed with the name of the person into whose hands, as I must needs conclude, you placed it, namely, Mr. Digby Mason.'

She had known this was coming from his first mention of that 'certain matter' (after which, while at the luncheon-table, she could trust herself to read no more). She had known that it must come, yet when her eye lit upon the name itself the flush on her cheek deepened. She felt as though it had received a blow in insult. If it was so, the hand that dealt it had done so under no misconception of the facts.

'Under these circumstances,' she read on, 'I am compelled, Hester, to demand of you an explanation. There are reasons which prevent my coming down to Medbury in person, or I should certainly have done so. The importance

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of the matter as it affects yourself can hardly be exaggerated. I adjure you, whatever motive you may have hitherto had for reticence, to be frank now. I am afraid that much mischief has been done by your withholding from me a confidence which I think I had some right to expect. I do not, however, wish to reproach you. Even at this eleventh hour it may not be too late to remedy what I am well convinced has been a grievous error. But I must know exactly upon what grounds we stand. I do not make this appeal to you, Hester, as your trustee. Had I done my duty from the first in that capacity this misfortune could never have occurred; but as your guardian—the representative of your dead father—I must insist on knowing under what circumstances you have made over so large a sum of money to one whom he had so little reason to call his friend.'

The letter ended with expressions of kindness and affection, but to Hester it seemed that they were wanting in spontaneity. Having

written upon so grave a subject, and involving what might even be so grave a charge, it had struck her correspondent that it behoved him to remind her that he was still her well-wisher; but she felt that for the present, at least, she had forfeited the respect of her father's friend.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
LONDON